

Full Bloom by bumblebeesknees

Category: Haikyuu!!

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Summary:

After the closing ceremonies, Oikawa and Iwaizumi head back home to Miyagi. Turns out this thing between them that's been a lifetime in the making – that probably should've been made whole years ago – still needs a little more time to form.

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It should be difficult to find any single instance that stands out brighter than the rest, all of them powered by the same steady current of lifelong affection, but there are two moments Hajime keeps going back to:

In the first, they're eighteen.

Relationships: Iwaizumi Hajime/Oikawa Tooru

Comments: 70

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Collections: All Time Favs, High Quality Haikyuu, re-reads that

make me feral, these made me feel things

Full Bloom

Author's Note:

listen, sometimes your heart just wants you to spend half the year writing about that very specific childhood friends to lovers yearning that can only happen with [these two crazy kids](#).

this story is both for and because of featherweightqueen, who: spent hundreds of hours listening to my whining, made sure this got finished, and introduced me to haikyuu in the first place!!
thank you for being the absolute best <3<3

Hajime has had this planned out for the better part of the year: after the Olympics, he's going to head home to Sendai to stay for at least a month. Being stationed in Tokyo since the start of the National team's training camp meant that he got to see his parents far more frequently than the twice-a-year flights home from Irvine but it's – it's just not the same. He can't remember the last time he'd been home without it feeling like *home*, without feeling that restlessness under his skin telling him he needs to get back to his real life. There had always been something to get back to.

This time isn't like that. What Hajime needs now is to sleep for a week and be fussed over by his mom before diving into what's next. He wants to eat her okonomiyaki three times a day until he's sick of it, sick enough that he's not going to get those unexpected pangs of longing in the middle of the night when he's back in California. He needs to spend another week awake but lazing around like a particularly spoiled cat, one more to catch up with his idiot friends, and then a final week to be a filial son and sort out all the repair work his dad's offhandedly mentioned over the last few months because there's zero chance Dad actually called any of the contractors Hajime had sent him information for. Possibly, Hajime should have sent this information to Mom. Actually, Hajime should've just made the arrangements himself from Tokyo and let them know when to expect a knock on the door.

Oikawa has the same plan he does. At least the "go home and be treated like a six year-old" part, if not the rest.

Back in the spring, Oikawa had messaged to the group chat: *To DOUBLE confirm, will everyone be in Sendai after the games?* he'd sent at what was a reasonable time for him but the middle of the night for everyone else. It hadn't stopped Hanamaki from replying, *depends on who's asking* five seconds later because "being between jobs" really means dicking around the internet at 4am. Hajime had woken up to an incomprehensible string of texts between the two of them and a single, ...*ok i don't wanna know what all that's about but i'll be around oikawa-san* from Watari from the early morning.

And, in the messages with just Hajime and Oikawa:

[Tooru]

4:43am: *Iwa-chan!*

4:43am: *Please please buy Tokyo to Sendai tickets for me*

4:44am: *Save me from the fx fees, you know that's where they get you*

4:44am: *Late morning, day after the closing*

4:45am: *I'll pay you back when I'm in Japan (ノ●ㄣ●)ノ*:° ✧*

[me]

7:05am: *I bet*

[Tooru]

7:07am: *<3*

[me]

11:36am: *Just emailed*

[Tooru]

5:30pm: *You're the best!*

5:32pm: *Wait why is there only one ticket?? Where's Iwa-chan's?*

[me]

5:45pm: *Are you crazy*

5:46pm: *I'm not gonna be stuck beside you for two hours in a speeding train with no escape*

[Tooru]

5:59pm: *Are you serious?*

[me]

5:59pm: *Yeah?*

[Tooru]

6:00pm: (□□□)_□n□

Hajime somehow manages to keep up the ruse for the next four months. He keeps it up through reuniting with Oikawa in Tokyo, the weeks they spend together in the Olympic village, through Oikawa sweeping him into a monstrous hug after the biggest win of his career to date – even the morning of, when Oikawa had just glared at Hajime's overly casual, "I have to finish stuff up here. I'll see you in a couple days at Sendai when you come over for dinner with Mom and Dad, all right?"

"No, it's *not* all right – you should've just told me to get tickets for the day after!"

"Stop whining and go catch your ride."

Hajime keeps it up all the way until he boards the train in Ueno station. He spots Oikawa sitting at the window seat, curled up on the cushy seats with his earpods in and glasses on, tapping away at his phone. He's got a tiny, little kid smile on his face that means he's texting with his sister. Hajime knows for certain that Oikawa's shittalking him and that Hiromi nee-san's indulging him the way she has been since Oikawa was one minute old. *Can you believe what a butthead Iwa-chan is*, Oikawa is saying. *Can you beat him up for me*, and Hiromi is responding, *I'll send a guy over and get it taken care of*, *don't you worry* never mind the fact that Oikawa's twenty-six and Hiromi lives in Boston now with Hitoshi-san.

It isn't until Hajime has put away his suitcase and takes his own seat beside him that Oikawa glances up and his mouth drops open.

"Hey," says Hajime and bursts into cackles at the look of outrage on Oikawa's face.

"You – I can't believe you!" The indignation lasts for only a second

before Oikawa starts to laugh. He punches Hajime's arm, hard, and the bruise that's going to leave is already worth it. "You unbelievable jerk. I just spent ten minutes slandering your name to everyone you know!"

"How's that any different from normal?"

Oikawa shakes his head. The sunlight streaming through the window turns the stray strands of his hair even paler, into a translucent gold. "Any more stunts like this and I'm going to replace you with Makki," he warns.

"Go ahead," snorts Hajime. "Though I'd be the only person winning in that scenario."

"No you wouldn't, because your life would be even more boring and sad than it already is without Oikawa-san's sparkling presence." Oikawa hands over one of his earpods to Hajime and reaches for his laptop bag tucked beneath his seat. "I was *going* to take a nap—" that explains the glasses— "but now we're going to get a head start on our rewatch of Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood."

"That's an awful idea." He'd been there for Oikawa's first run through and he knows how this is going to go. "You're gonna start blubbing the second they show Ed and Al as kids and use my t-shirt to wipe your snot—"

"Yep!" Oikawa cheerfully interrupts. "Just like old times!"

And it really is because Hajime grumbles but acquiesces, and Oikawa pulls up the same collection of .mp4 episodes they'd torrented back when they were in middle school. "It's okay because I'll buy the DVDs when I have money," Oikawa used to say in an assuring sort of way, as though *that's* what Hajime would report him to the cops for and this was a valid excuse. "It's okay because I have a legit copy back home," Oikawa says now.

Like before, Oikawa scoots in as close as he can. Their temples knock together. Hajime pulls out dried seaweed and individually packaged slices of milk breads and outrageously expensive clementines he'd grabbed from the conbini near his place and predictably, Oikawa

makes a face at the seaweed chips and shamelessly calls dibs on the rest. He starts to sniffle when tiny eleven year-old Ed trades his arm for his brother, pinches Hajime's thigh when Hajime huffs out a vindicated, 'hah'. Eventually, Oikawa shuffles so he can comfortably drop his head on Hajime's shoulder. Within the next episode, he falls asleep.

Hajime pauses the show and stays awake as Oikawa drools on his shirt. The frames of his glasses dig into Hajime and his hair brushes against Hajime's jaw, his neck, and this is also how it was before. Oikawa's always been like this: lulled to sleep by the rocking motions of trains and cars and buses, as long as he has a shoulder to take advantage of. Hajime watches something else on his phone as they zip past Fukushima and enter into Miyagi, only nudging Oikawa awake when they're five minutes out from Sendai. He tries to keep his face from doing anything weird as Oikawa fumbles with his belongings, still fuzzy with sleep and soft in a way that should be at odds with his hulking athlete's body but isn't, not at all.

Oikawa pulls down the absolutely massive backpack he brought him. It's the kind that Hajime's only seen before in magazines for "rugged adventurers" who go on fifty mile hikes entirely on foot. People who are, in the most fundamental way, the exact opposite of Oikawa. The backpack is in lieu of his actual suitcase, which he sent back to San Juan with Mateo because, "Unlike you I love myself, and will never get on a train with the worst form of luggage."

"And dragging this thing around is better?" Even with Oikawa's sturdy frame, Hajime's pretty sure a gentle tap on the bag would topple Oikawa over. "What d'you even have in there?"

"Presents." At Hajime's skeptical look, he says, sunnily, "None for Iwa-chan, though. I got hungry one night at the village and ate the entire

pack of alfajores I had set aside for you. Woops."

"You—"

Oikawa's eyes light up when he spots Hajime's mom at the station. This too, is like before. He stands back for exactly ten seconds as Hajime greets her before shoving him aside and sweeping her into a hug big enough to lift her off her feet.

Mom laughs, patting Oikawa's back. "It's good to see you too, Tooru-kun."

"Auntie, you're wearing the sandals I got you last time!" Mom doesn't even come up to Oikawa's chin, so she doesn't see Oikawa mouth, *presents*, at Hajime over her head. Nor does she see Hajime's response involving a single finger.

"Of course," she says, "they're so pretty and comfortable!"

Oikawa shoots Hajime a victorious smirk in response before going, "How's Uncle? Did he come with you? Ah, let me guess – he's parked four streets away with the blinkers on, ready to get moving as soon as the police drive by..."

This makes Mom laugh again. "You know us too well, Tooru-kun," and Oikawa beams at her, gaze fond.

And the thing is. The thing is that Oikawa has had his hooks in Hajime's parents since the moment they met. At first by virtue of being a soft, sticky crybaby with perfectly round cheeks who even the prickliest bastard would be a sucker for, Hajime included – and then by always being ready to team up with them to tease Hajime. "Tooru-kun's a very colourful person, isn't he?" Mom used to say. "Always such an adventure. I'll miss having him visit." But Oikawa never did stop visiting even after he moved eleven thousand miles away. Everything that's happened since they left behind Seijoh – it only brought Oikawa closer to them. Right now, looking at him laughing with Mom – Hajime feels the full, staggering weight of it.

That's probably another thing Hajime should do while he's here, something he should've started on a while ago: figure out how to

look at Oikawa and feel the way a best friend should.

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Whenever they're back at the same time, Oikawa and Hajime are mostly treated as a unit. Their schedule is either identical or mirror images of each other even when it doesn't include their shared group of friends. The first night back in Sendai is spent with their own families. The next day Oikawa is coming over for dinner, and the following afternoon Hajime is going over to the Oikawas' for lunch. The week after all six of them are going to that Indian place near where Hiromi nee-san used to live because their parents have also been friends for as long as Oikawa and Hajime have and South Asian cuisine is a shared passion that none of them can replicate at home.

The night Oikawa comes for dinner, he brings over gifts for Hajime's parents: a pair of soft leather gloves for Mom, the kind that always catches her eye but would never buy for herself, and a signed copy of Higashino Keigo's latest thriller for Dad. This is one of those things that can only happen with Oikawa. Not only had he somehow spotted and recognized Higashino among the thousands of spectators during the games, but he was also brazen enough to accost him in public and charming enough to not warrant a "what the hell? get lost" two seconds into his request.

"Looks like I win this round," says Oikawa, smug, and Hajime thinks fondly of the days when this kind of thing would prompt him to kick Oikawa's ass instead of wanting to kiss him senseless. In retrospect, the asskicking was at least fifty percent a coping mechanism for his stupid teenage self.

"Still behind by two," says Hajime, and Oikawa squawks, "Excuse me! I shouldn't be penalized because you come back more often--"

"Yeah you should. Visit your parents more often, asshole."

"They're retired! They like traveling! They fly to see ME three times a year!"

"What is it you always say? Excuses are for losers? Is that who you are now, Loserkawa?"

Oikawa puts on a sympathetic face. "Oh, Iwa-chan, I hadn't realized you still only have the same two brain cells you did when you were six! Of course you wouldn't understand smart-people things. Concepts like *nuance* and *context*—"

The ensuing scuffle is only stopped because Dad comes in to tell them dinner's ready. Oikawa immediately scurries out of the headlock Hajime has him in and goes, "Is that gyudon I smell? Uncle, we have to make sure to get to it before your greedy son gets his hands on the bowl and takes it all."

"We can take turns distracting him," agrees Dad. "It's the only way to guarantee we get fed."

"I can hear you two covert operatives loud and clear," Hajime feels the need to point out, but Oikawa just turns to give him a quick conspiratorial look before continuing, "Out of respect for you, Uncle, I'll be the distraction first. I'm going to trust you to save me my fair share! Do I have your permission to do what I have to to complete this mission? Even if you and Auntie find it... disturbing?"

"You absolutely do," says Dad. The lines at the corners of his eyes have become prominent, made deeper by the amusement that's creasing his face. A weakness for Oikawa's ridiculousness is a trait shared by every Iwaizumi, apparently, but Hajime's the only one with enough of a spine to not give into it a hundred percent of the time.

Dinner's full of reliable favourites: gyudon and stir-fried tofu and roasted eggplants, a heap of beef gyoza that Oikawa's surely going to thief away, a massive pot of noodles that's piled with sesame and roasted garlic and shredded scallions. Oikawa sits at the spot he always sits at in the Iwaizumi dining room, his right shoulder pressed against Hajime's left. It's the place that's been his since he first came

to Hajime's house when they were four – or so the story goes. Neither of them remember this.

Oikawa *ooh's* and *aah's* over Mom's presentation because he's an unabashed kiss-ass when it suits him. Mom smiles at his antics, so warm that it almost hurts to look at. Hajime's gotten to a point where he doesn't dwell too long on the what-could-have-beens with Oikawa but it isn't until right now that it hits him that his ability to do that had been – situational. That it had only been possible to not think about it because Oikawa hadn't been right in front of him, being the most extreme and unapologetic version of himself. Because right now Hajime can't do anything *but* think about it, think about what a goddamn idiot he is, an idiot for not understanding any of this when he could've actually done something about it, an idiot for not being able to look away now that he *does* understand. For not even wanting to look away, not in any real sense, even though–

"Tooru-kun, how's your young man doing?" asks Mom once everyone's plates are at capacity. "He couldn't come to the games to see you play?"

It's all that Hajime can do to not look at her with utmost betrayal even though there's no way for Mom to know it's the absolute last thing Hajime would want to talk about. Of course Hajime's mom has no idea that her son's been in love with Oikawa for years.

Hajime's concentrating so ferociously at keeping his hands steady that he almost misses hearing Oikawa's answer.

"Ah, Juan," Hajime hears Oikawa say through the sound of the blood rushing past his ears. "It didn't work out between us."

For an instant, Hajime freezes. So does the rest of the table. And then, very slowly, he turns his gaze toward Oikawa. Oikawa, who, in a move he's been pulling since he was twelve and graduated on to advanced evasive maneuvers, starts popping every possible item within reach into his mouth so he doesn't have to talk. He's very deliberately avoiding looking at Hajime in the way he does when he's done something they both know Hajime's going to kick his ass over once he finds out.

Like keeping a break-up between his boyfriend of *three years* from his best friend.

"What!" Dad echoes Hajime's own thoughts perfectly. "I'm sorry to hear that, Tooru-kun. What happened?"

"Yeah, *Tooru-kun*," says Hajime, and takes petty satisfaction in how Oikawa winces, guilty. "What happened?"

"Iwa-chan, don't look at me like that!" The guilt transforms into petulance. Turning back to Hajime's parents, he continues, "I wasn't trying to keep it a secret – it's just very recent and you know I've had a lot on my mind the last few weeks."

The dots connect all too fast in Hajime's head. His vision goes red.

"Are you telling me he dropped you right before the *Olympics*?" There's absolutely no excuse for that. "I'm going to kill him."

Hajime's going to murder that asshole the next time he's in San Juan. This is what you get for being stupid enough to break-up with Hajime's best friend before the most important competition of his *life* and not having the foresight to keep his address hidden.

"Hey! While I'm all about Iwa-chan killing someone in my name, what makes you think I got dumped?" complains Oikawa. "Maybe I was the dumper!" The righteousness in his expression quickly disappears when he takes in the pitying looks from every Iwaizumi present. "Rude," he mutters, deflating. "From Auntie and Uncle too? I'm so betrayed."

"Oh, Tooru-kun. It's not a bad thing, to want to hold on to the people you love," says Mom.

"Yeah," says Hajime gruffly. He's annoyed and angry and maybe a little hurt that Oikawa didn't let him know about such a huge change in his life – especially when Hajime had made a point to always ask after Juan, no matter how much it physically pained him to do so because that's just what you do when your friend has a partner – but he's even *more* indignant about the fact that it happened in the first place. "His goddamn loss."

In any other situation, Hajime swearing in front of his parents would result in Dad going, "Hajime! Is this how we raised you?" But because this is about Oikawa, Hajime and his dad are in perfect solidarity. Dad says, "Hajime's right." Then he declares, "I never did like him," which is a lie so shameless it doesn't even deserve correction. Because what Dad had said when Oikawa had brought Juan back to Sendai a year ago had been, "I'm so glad Tooru-kun found such a gentleman." Dad had said, "You can tell how much they care for each other," and he'd been *right*.

Now, the look on Oikawa's face is complicated. "It wasn't like that," he murmurs, so quiet that Hajime's certain that he's the only one who heard, and not because Oikawa wanted him to. But between one blink and the next the clouds clear from Oikawa's eyes, and the smile that appears a moment later is dazzling in the way it gets when he's hoping its shine will be a sufficient distraction.

"Uncle, did you know you're more loyal to me than my own father?" says Oikawa. "He would never admit that life would be boring and miserable without me in it."

"Probably not to your face," agrees Dad. "But I'm sure he feels that way!"

"Uncle knows this guy's head can't afford to get any bigger." Hajime rolls his eyes when Oikawa gasps and places a hand over his chest. To his parents, Hajime says, accusingly, "You two are too soft with him."

Mom laughs. "*We're* too soft, huh?"

"Don't listen to him, Auntie. You're perfect! There's a reason you two are tied for first-place as my favourite Iwaizumis while Iwa-chan is stuck on number eleven, only ahead of cousin Kyou..."

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It isn't until later that Oikawa abruptly says, "I really wasn't trying to keep it a secret, Iwa-chan."

Mom had shooed them out of the house after dinner, and they'd ended up throwing a ball around in Hajime's backyard. Idly practicing their volleys and receives, careless in a way they haven't been since they were kids. It's a clear, warm night, and Hajime's home in more ways than one: his parents are through the doors, curled up to watch the evening news while his favourite person stands just steps away from him. Hajime had been in the middle of telling Oikawa about the time Miya had almost come to blows with Sakusa over *Naruto* – "Not gonna lie, I was ready to back him up," Hajime had been saying. "How can you trust a man on the court when they're on board with–"

And then Oikawa says *that* and it's all Hajime can do to send the ball back before it smacks him in the face.

Is Oikawa actually talking about this?

Hajime had been sure he'd picked up on Oikawa's cues properly earlier: Oikawa doesn't shut down and yell when he doesn't want to get into something, he isn't blunt about it, but he's an expert at deflecting and distracting. Sure Oikawa's not looking at him while he says it right now – he's concentrating on his next set back to Hajime – but he's actually bringing this up on his own. Maybe he hadn't wanted to get into it with Hajime's parents right there but even with Hajime Oikawa's not exactly the most forthcoming guy. Especially about things like this.

As soon as Hajime has the thought though he has to correct himself: no. That's not true, is it? Oikawa says things when he has to. He vents and complains, but doesn't talk about real things, doesn't feel the need to get those off his chest – and to be fair, neither does Hajime. They're not built to be like that with each other – but Oikawa talks when talking is the only way to get something to change. When *talking* becomes synonymous with *doing*. It's why at eighteen, Oikawa had grabbed his arm on their way home after practice to say, "Remember how I said I liked guys, Iwa-chan? Well,

there's a specific guy." His hands had been shaking, but Oikawa had still said, "It's you."

That's a dangerous territory to go into right now. Hajime reminds himself that this isn't the same, not at all, except for the fact that if Oikawa is bringing it up, it means it's important to him.

But which part? The fact that it happened, or what Oikawa had actually said – that he hadn't wanted Hajime to think he'd hidden it?

"Tooru," he finally manages to say, not knowing how to continue. They don't stop their little rally of volleying the ball back and forth.

But that's all the response Oikawa needed from him.

"I was going to call you," starts Oikawa. "But when it happened – it hadn't really sunk in." Hajime relates to this, because it hasn't yet sunk into him either. "By the time it did it was in the middle of the night for you and then I just. I didn't let myself dwell on it, I guess. Maybe I'll get it after I fly back. He texted me – he's been using my time here to find a new place."

"Shit." Oikawa did say it was recent, but the fact that Juan is still in their shared apartment– "It really happened right before you flew out?" And then a horrible thought occurs to Hajime and he catches the ball when it next comes his way because depending on the answer Hajime might actually get on a plane tonight *with* the volleyball in his hands and use it to murder Oikawa's ex-boyfriend. "Wait a minute. Did this happen *while you were here?*"

"Urgh, Iwa-chan, no! Don't be so dramatic. He wouldn't do that." Oikawa makes a face. "Throw the ball back."

Reluctantly, Hajime does, and after a few moments of silence he breathes past the ball of anger that seemed to have made a permanent home inside of him and says, "I guess... I guess I don't get it. You two were really – how are you not more messed up over this?" It might have been a long time since Hajime and Oikawa had been living in each other's pockets, but he's still confident in his ability to tell whether Oikawa is okay or not.

And he *shouldn't* be fine. He had thought, in the rare, midnight hours he let himself think about such things – Hajime had thought that this was it for Oikawa. He didn't know whether Oikawa wanted to do the normal relationship things – whether Oikawa wanted to get married and take in another cat, buy a big house and fill it with kids – but if Oikawa wanted someone beside him for whatever came next, it made sense it would be Juan.

He didn't have to talk about his feelings with Hajime for Hajime to know. It had been obvious: Oikawa doesn't make room in his life for just any person, doesn't *move in* with them, doesn't bring them back to his hometown to meet his friends and family. He doesn't tell Hajime, "You have to like him, Iwa-chan. I mean it! You have to be nice. You can embarrass me all you want but you have to be nice to him," as though it's actually important to him to have his oldest friend approve because he wasn't going to drop them in the off chance Hajime *didn't*.

It's not just anyone who can have Oikawa's face go all soft in a way Hajime rarely sees, when Juan would occasionally pop into their Facetime to cheerfully say, in English, "Don't listen to this cruel monster, Hajime, you are looking very handsome," before squeezing Oikawa's shoulder and leaving them to catch up.

The smile on Oikawa's face right now is that awful plastic thing Hajime thought he'd seen the last of.

"I don't seem upset enough to you?" He says this so lightly that Hajime immediately knows he messed up in asking what he did. "Should I be weeping in your arms, bemoaning my life, cursing Juan's name while drinking away my sorrows?"

"You just lost all my sympathy, Shittykawa."

This gets a bark of genuine laughter out of him. "Does this mean you take back your promise of murder?"

"Nah, that still stands on principle. It's a dick move. Honestly – honestly I wouldn't have thought he'd be the type."

"He isn't," says Oikawa sharply, and this is perhaps the most surreal

part of this: that Oikawa isn't bad mouthing, isn't spitting nails, isn't saying, *yeah, he's dead to me now*. "He would've waited until I was back in San Juan. But you know me, Iwa-chan. I can't leave well enough alone."

He can't. Oikawa has never been able to keep a single rock unturned. But if Hajime knows Oikawa best, knows with certainty that Oikawa had been – is? – in love with this man – then with equal certainty, Hajime knows that Oikawa had been loved in return. He'd known from the start: "I am my happiest when I am with him," Juan had told Hajime in careful English the first time they'd met, after spending fifteen minutes respectfully listening to Hajime's no-bullshit shovel talk. The shovel talk that had to have the weight of Oikawa's parents, sister, brother-in-law, every single one of Oikawa's friends back home in Japan because Hajime had been the one granted the privilege of meeting Juan first. Then, "He is my joy, and I love every piece of him I have seen. I will surely love every piece of him left to be found."

"Even the difficult parts?" Hajime had asked. He needed to know. Even though he hadn't realized it yet, hadn't realized the full of who and what Oikawa was to him – simply in the capacity of being Oikawa's best friend Hajime needed to know. "Tooru isn't – he isn't an easy person."

With Oikawa, most people would probably assume that when Hajime calls him *difficult* he means that Oikawa is – annoying. Petty, vain, single-minded. Maybe a deeper read would be able to identify that Oikawa has a vicious pride and is deeply sensitive to failure, that he's quick to anger and slow to forgive. Those are all true and frustrating parts of him – but they aren't what Hajime means. As far as Hajime is concerned, none of those are acceptable reasons to ever call it quits with Oikawa.

No. The reason Oikawa isn't an easy person is because he is unparalleled in his determination, his loyalty. When he decides on something – or someone – it's forever, and he expects the same back in return. No, he demands it. He demands that his bullshit and his bitterness and his bouts of frosty anger are weathered when necessary, pushed back against when not because it isn't a question that he'll do the same. *I'm counting on you*, he says on the court. *I know you won't let me down*.

Oikawa is difficult because he won't tolerate anything less, anything different. He won't compromise. Without this one thing, he won't have patience for anything else. Most people can't meet that challenge. Most people aren't wired with the right elements, to be able to withstand such blazing conviction without burning themselves out.

But Juan had understood a part of it, if not all. Juan had said, "Hajime, what is an easy person? I have never met one." Juan had said, "Tooru is not easy, but he is – incredible. My life is better for having him. It is more colourful. This is all very new, still, but Tooru... he makes it very obvious, that he cares for me. I will do my best to make sure that he understands the same. That there are no doubts, easy or not."

That was three months in. Unless Hajime completely misunderstood him over the last three years – someone like that doesn't change their minds without it being something big. Something that has Oikawa murmur, *it wasn't like that*.

"Oikawa." Hajime catches the ball one more time, takes it out of play. "What happened?"

It's the same question Hajime and his parents asked earlier. But this time Hajime says the words as gently as he can. It still comes out a little rough. Even after twenty-six years into this life, Hajime still doesn't know quite how to show tenderness with words – but here, with just the two of them, illuminated by the street lights in this hazy summer night – Hajime is certain, in the way he only ever is with Oikawa, that it won't matter that Hajime's never quite known how to say these things.

Plopping down on the ground with a sigh – big enough that in any

other situation, Hajime would think it put upon – Oikawa pats down on the empty space beside him. Hajime takes his cue and sits. Watches Oikawa unfold his long legs out in front of him, the grass tickling against the bare skin of his sunbrowned calves.

"Remember how you cursed me?" starts Oikawa, and his mouth quirks a little in response to Hajime's raised eyebrows. "You said I'd never be happy – not until I was a handsome old man – because I'd never stop chasing volleyball."

"I'd never call your ugly face handsome," says Hajime, because he does remember.

"So mean," complains Oikawa. Then, more seriously, "You were right. Even then I knew you were right. I think – I think I'm always going to want more. I know I'm not going to retire until they force me to, and then I'm going to want to coach a championship team. And then a gold-medal winning team. I don't think I'll ever want to slow down, Iwa-chan. And Juan–"

Oikawa pauses, brows furrowed as he tries to find the correct words. "He's not like that," is what he finally decides on. "People like you and me, Iwa-chan – Juan isn't like that. I couldn't – it wouldn't work. If I'm going to be away all the time, moving around the country for games, leaving him alone every other week for the next twenty years – that wouldn't work. I don't think even he realized how hard it would be for him until we'd moved in together. That's not what he – and what's going to happen when he wants kids?"

The stakes escalate so unexpectedly with the last question that Hajime leans back in shock, as though the whiplash wasn't just metaphorical. Oikawa looks annoyed at this. "Oh, don't look so surprised Iwa-chan – you know what his family's like. Of course he wants kids. But what's he going to do? Raise them by himself half the time? Wait another ten years and hope I won't want all those things when I'm older and feeling my age, that I'll want to slow down?" Oikawa shakes his head. "He doesn't want that. *I* wouldn't do that to him. It just – it wouldn't work."

It wouldn't work.

Hajime doesn't think Oikawa noticed how many times he'd said it in the last few seconds, repeated like a mantra. But he hadn't said it the way someone does when they're trying to convince themselves of something that in a fundamental part of them they know to be false.

No. The way Oikawa says it – it's the way someone talks when they know something to be true but can't believe it, can't believe the world could be made in such a way. It leaves Hajime unmoored just hearing it.

Carefully, Hajime says, "Did he ask you to – to settle down?"

"You mean, did he ask me if I wanted to get married?" That is, in fact, what Hajime meant but couldn't bring himself to say. Oikawa mentioned *kids*. Hajime might be Oikawa's best friend, such an essential piece of Hajime's identity that it drowns out almost everything else, drowns out the parts of him that can't look at Oikawa without feeling a fierce longing in his chest, without being bowled over with how fucking stunning he is – but perhaps there's a part of Hajime that's even more primal than *loves Oikawa Tooru*, some ingrained mechanism of self-preservation that had him ask around it.

"He didn't," says Oikawa, taking Hajime's silence as the confirmation it's meant to be. He tips his head back and closes his eyes. "I'd have said yes, if he did." Then, as though those words don't set off brand new fissures amidst the well worn grooves of Hajime's heart, "Of course I would've. I might've even gotten to it first. But it would've meant something different to him, and he realized it before I did."

It would've meant slowing down, Oikawa means. No one will ever claim that Hajime's good at reading between the lines, but that's only because all of his ability has been used up with Oikawa. And it's because of this ability that Hajime understands this: that Oikawa had found someone who he'd want beside him in that special way for the rest of his life. An empty bed for half the year isn't something that bothered him as long as he knew he had a home to come back to. It's not at the core of what Oikawa needs in a partner, what is the most important to him.

But it is most important for a lot of people. For most people, even. To not always feel like they're waiting. To want someone who's beside

them, always. Someone who is literally, physically *there*.

Even so—

"Still his loss," Hajime says. That part will be true no matter the reason, no matter the person: anyone who lets Oikawa go is letting go of something that they'll never find again. "That sucks, and it's real shitty, but even with all that – even if all that's true, he's the one that'll be missing out."

Oikawa turns his head around to stare at Hajime. He blinks widely, a wet sheen to his eyes. This is how Oikawa looks when he's carefully holding together his broken heart. Hajime's reminded of another time, walking home through the dark, quiet streets after their final match together: just like then, the surprise in Oikawa's expression settles into something like helpless fondness.

"Wow," he teases, but his voice is thick. "Who would've ever guessed Iwa-chan could be so sweet to me?"

"Obviously no one that's ever spent more than a minute with you," is Hajime's instant response and Oikawa holds his pout for exactly one second before he gives into laughter. Kicking at Oikawa's ankle, Hajime says, "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Oh, don't worry about me, Iwa-chan. I'm not going to sit around feeling sorry for myself."

That's not quite what Hajime had been asking, but it's an answer all the same.

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Oikawa leaves sometime around ten after cheerily giving his

goodbyes to Hajime's parents. Hajime gives himself ten seconds to think about whether he's really going to do what he's about to do and decides yeah: he is. Hajime doesn't pull this kind of thing quite as often as Oikawa does – or maybe he does, and it's just a different brand than Oikawa's and so he's not as attuned – but when it happens, it's just as deliberate and calculated as Oikawa's no matter how much he's aware that it's the mother of bad ideas.

He pulls out his phone and calls Juan.

There's a twelve-hour time difference between Tokyo and San Juan. It's Tuesday morning. If Hajime remembers Oikawa's offhanded comments on Juan's family vacation plans, the schools are still on winter break. This is important because Juan teaches physics and history at the high school that's down the street from the team's regular gym. He and Oikawa had met because the inter-high volleyball tournament for the city was coming up, and Juan wasn't the coach but somehow got saddled in setting up the logistics for his school and had come to scope out the premises.

"Of course, Tooru helped me find the administrator's office out of the goodness of his heart," Juan had said, the humour in his voice obvious. Oikawa had elbowed his ribs and went, "Absolutely no one's gonna believe that," before clarifying, "It's because I could see those shoulders from sixty-feet away and obviously had to go investigate who they belonged to." It's the kind of unbelievable fairytale stroke of luck that's never happened for Oikawa in any other part of his life.

Juan's number has been saved in Hajime's phone since that very first meeting. They have a sporadic WhatsApp chat – which is, predictably and embarrassingly, entirely about Oikawa – but has only called him twice. Both times had been from the airport: once because they'd planned a surprise for Oikawa, and the other because Hajime's flight came in at 3am and Juan is the sort of guy who'd make the drive to the airport to pick up his boyfriend's best friend to let said boyfriend sleep through the night.

Hajime's well aware of the sheer stupidity of what he's doing, but it's not enough to get him to stop. Remembering that Oikawa had found a good thing no matter how shit Hajime feels when he thinks about it, that he found a good person, and then–

The call connects after three rings.

"Hello, Hajime," greets Juan quietly.

"You piece of shit," says Hajime. Apparently all the benevolence and understanding he had when talking to Oikawa didn't have a place here and what was left was an inexplicably yawning sense of betrayal that couldn't be justified even in front of the most sympathetic jury.

"I am hanging up," says Juan and does so before Hajime can even get the first syllable of *like hell you are*, out of his mouth.

Hajime stares down at the homescreen of his phone. Except for the warning, the entire thing is such an Oikawa thing to do that it makes Hajime even more furious. He calls back, and the second Juan picks up – which: of course he does, the guy can't be anything less than perfectly decent in every situation instead of blocking Hajime's number like a regular person, the way you do when your ex-boyfriend's unhinged best friend makes an international call to shout at you – Hajime demands, "What happened to life being better with Oikawa in it?"

Across the Pacific, Juan slowly, deeply exhales. "That is true."

"Can't be," growls Hajime. "Because if it was, you wouldn't have dumped him at all, never mind right before he flew out for the *Olympics*." Then, because it bears repeating, "You piece of *shit*. He was ready to spend his life with you and you, *you*–"

Hajime can't even finish. There is silence on the other side. One second, two seconds, then–

Then Juan says, "Hajime, why did you call me?"

"Because even if I get on a plane right now it'd take me another twenty-four hours before I can find you and kick your ass–"

"No," interrupts Juan. "You and me, we are not friends. I do not have to listen to you. But I am, because even though it's been many weeks, I suppose a part of me still believes I deserve some kind of... consequence. Perhaps a punishment, for not being who Tooru needed me to be. Even though I know in my mind that the opposite is also

true, and I would not wish for him to feel the same way."

Despite it being nowhere near the actual point, Hajime can't stop himself from snapping, "Don't you turn any of this around on him—"

"You know very well that that is not what I am doing. I need you to be clear with me. You are calling for a reason. I am sure Tooru told you everything he wanted you to know. So what is it that you need to tell me, or hear me say?"

The first time Hajime had met Oikawa's team in San Juan – barely twenty and stumbling his way through a country that had been unknown to him in every way but somehow housed the one person that's more familiar to him than any other – Javier Torres had said, as translated by Canadian native Nathan Green, "Ah, it makes sense that Toto's best friend's a medalist at cutting through bullshit." It had been a little weird to hear something that he's always known on some level, a small but necessary gear in the machinery that made up their friendship. Over the years Hajime has noticed this in everyone Oikawa is the fondest of: they're all somehow skilled at making simple the things Oikawa twists into knots inside his head.

Of course Juan would have the same quality.

Why is Hajime calling him? This isn't his relationship. Oikawa wouldn't appreciate – no, who's Hajime kidding? Oikawa would definitely appreciate it. He would be *delighted* to hear that this disaster phone call happened. Oikawa may understand the concept of boundaries but doesn't apply them in the usual way for himself. No matter how weirdly gracious Oikawa had been – still the most bizarre part – in selling this as a "it was no one's fault" kind of break-up, there's no question that he'd be insufferably smug if he found out that Hajime followed through with the least-likely-to-end-in-jail option that still captured the sentiment behind Hajime's threat of murder.

But that's not why he's doing it. Even if Oikawa wasn't himself about this sort of thing – if instead he was like Hajime, who'd most definitely blow a fuse if anyone pulled this behind his back – Hajime knows that he'd still have called Juan because–

"You love him," he says at last. "How could you – how can you leave him when that's true?"

Because Hajime can't imagine it.

He thinks back to Oikawa's mantra of, "it just wouldn't work," and how it had made some sense when they'd talked. Sometimes people do just want different things. But Hajime hadn't remembered one key fact: that that kind of outcome was something that applied to other people, ordinary people, people who knew how to lose and cut their losses.

That kind of outcome shouldn't apply to Oikawa.

"Ah," says Juan. "What did Tooru tell you?"

"He said it was that you – that you got lonely or some shit," says Hajime. "But that can't–"

"No? Why not?"

"Because," starts Hajime, and stops. Why not? Isn't that the question. "Because it's Oikawa, and that's not a good enough reason."

The silence on the other end is deafening.

If Hajime had ever been right in thinking that Juan hadn't figured out just how much Hajime loved Oikawa, the way that Hajime loved the man Juan had been *living with* – that Hajime's natural gruffness and how affection between the two of them manifested as threats and insults was enough to keep the truth of it blurred, out of focus – then he's just torpedoed it. He's just handed Juan a pair of perfectly rendered glasses and then pointed toward Hajime's stupid ass and said, "All those times you thought there might've been something going on with that guy? Those times he'd been looking at your boyfriend in a way that made you wonder? Yeah, you were right on the money."

"I see," says Juan slowly, and the way he says it– "Then I am not sure there is any reason that will be good enough for you."

"There's one," says Hajime. "There's one, even though it'd make you

an idiot—"

"That is not why." He sounds sharp. "It was not because I stopped caring." Then, "It is impossible to stop burning for Tooru once he ignites it inside of you. He simply has to be. You and me, we understand that better than anyone."

And now Hajime has absolutely no doubts left. "You didn't have to do it when you did."

"I would not have," says Juan. "Whether or not you believe me. But Tooru, he is observant. He could tell that I was not – that it had become difficult for me. He knew something was not right. He said, 'If you don't tell me, and I go to Tokyo, and I come back with anything less than gold because I wasn't at my best, because my head's still with you, wondering what you're hiding – if that happens, that'll be on you. I'm never going to forgive you.'" Juan sounds almost admiring. "He did not even flinch."

"Son of a bitch." Of course Oikawa didn't flinch as he emotionally blackmailed his boyfriend.

Everything Juan just relayed – it was so Oikawa that Hajime instantly knows that those are the exact words Oikawa had said, in that exact order. Of course Oikawa would lay it out with such ruthless conditions, such awful consequences. He's done it before. Hell, he'd done it to Hajime's *mother*.

"You know how he is," Juan repeats. "He doesn't believe in the 'right time.' Even though it was just a week before his flight, he respects me more for saying it, I think. Of course, that did not stop him from telling me to go sleep at my brother's house that very night, and stay there until he left for Japan."

"He wouldn't have just accepted it like that." Oikawa would've fought.

"He didn't. He argued, shouted – he did not stop until he understood. That what we needed to be happy, individually, could not happen without one of us giving up something essential in our own. And there – and there I take responsibility. For not knowing myself well

enough before I met Tooru, to know what I would need from my partner."

Hajime hadn't made the call to corroborate Oikawa's story – it would've been less mortifying if that *was* the reason, but it would also say uglier things about Hajime as a person, and between the two Hajime knows which camp he'd rather be in – but it's still a shock, to hear it confirmed from the other side: that it had happened quickly, and with Oikawa agreeing with the reasons even if he hadn't wanted to, even though he wasn't happy about it.

It still doesn't help Hajime comprehend how Oikawa, the most *too much* person Hajime has ever known, could be *not enough* for someone.

Of course he can't ever say that. Even though Hajime's sure that Juan knows, Hajime can't possibly bring himself to ask this to Juan in those certain terms. To make it so excruciatingly clear that for Hajime, *enough* doesn't even begin to describe what Oikawa is.

"But you love him," says Hajime. "And it killed a part of you to do it."

"Yes," says Juan, and this is the first time in the conversation that Juan's voice cracks. It startles Hajime to hear it. Juan always talks with such certainty, even when he's speaking a language he isn't fully comfortable with. "Is that what you called me to hear? That it hurt me?"

"And if he could – if he could've slowed down," says Hajime, unwilling to linger on the answer to Juan's question, "you'd have wanted to–"

"That's an impossible question," says Juan. "Because he wouldn't be Tooru if he did. And if he had told me he would, that he no longer wants to go higher, reach further – that he would be happy not dedicating his whole self to his first love in the way that fulfills him the most – I would not have believed him."

It's always been a gift and a curse for Hajime, to know Oikawa so well.

"He did say that, didn't he?" he rasps. Of course Oikawa would say it, would even mean it – after all, volleyball isn't the only thing Oikawa is capable of loving, of committing himself to. "He promised that after Tokyo, no matter how it turned out, he would do it. That he'd be happy to do it."

Hajime feels sick. He'd known that this wasn't mutual. He'd known there was more behind the *it wouldn't have worked* than the neat summary Oikawa had given him, the linear progression, the logical, flawless reasoning.

He hadn't realized that *it wouldn't have worked* was supposed to be a, *it wouldn't have worked, anyway*. A critical difference. Something that works itself back from a conclusion that was already inevitable. It didn't mean that Oikawa hadn't been truthful. Only that the truth could have been something else. The truth could have been something other than *I don't think I'll ever want to slow down* if Oikawa had been given the chance to walk through the door and find out for himself.

"Yes." Juan sounds very tired.

"But there's nothing he could've done. You'd already made up your mind. And he knew it."

"You are right. I had." He doesn't bring up the fact that Oikawa had, somehow, ultimately, come to agree that it was the right decision. In return, Hajime doesn't say what a monumental error he'd made to doubt Oikawa's words, to not believe what Oikawa had been saying. "I am finished with this. Whatever I may have owed Tooru – it is settled now. Goodbye, Hajime. Don't call me again."

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Oikawa has been a constant in Hajime's life for so long that he doesn't even remember meeting him. They'd grown up together, grown into themselves together. He hadn't stopped having a permanent place in Hajime's life even after Oikawa had moved across the ocean: they may have talked less, saw each other less – but the time they did have together was sweeter, more cherished, substantial in a different way.

It should be difficult to find any single instance that stands out brighter than the rest, all of them powered by the same steady current of lifelong affection, but there are two moments Hajime keeps going back to:

In the first, they're eighteen.

It's a month after Inter-highs, a month of helplessly watching Oikawa sink into something awful and hopeless, hearing Oikawa say horrifying, incomprehensible things like how he might quit volleyball. No amount of yelling or gruff but sincere attempts from Hajime in expressing how Oikawa was the best player in their prefecture, how he had a whole career ahead of him, had been able to budge Oikawa. Then, after Irihata-sensei somehow managed to get *Jose Blanco* to talk to Oikawa, the change is instantaneous: Oikawa is back, and the fire in his eyes is burning wilder and fiercer than ever. "We're going to Spring Nationals," he tells Hajime. "We're going to Spring Nationals, then I'm going to play with Blanco-san in Argentina. This isn't where I stop, Iwa-chan. I'm not stopping until I make it to the national team."

It doesn't matter to Hajime that he hadn't been the one to get Oikawa to see what was so obvious to him – that Oikawa was incredible on the court, unmatched and unstoppable and with so much further to go, the glowing center in any team of six – it didn't matter, so long as Oikawa *did*. Hajime might burst from the happiness and relief washing through him. He can't stop smiling.

"You finally got your head out of your ass, huh?" He smacks Oikawa's

shoulder with the clear message that he'd been an idiot for ever even considering stopping as an option.

But some weeks later as they're walking home after practice, Hajime asks, curious, "What changed your mind, after Inter-highs? What did Blanco-san tell you?"

They're just weeks away from the qualifiers for Spring Nationals. The summer sun is still out, low in the sky but not yet bleeding red. The path they're on is so familiar and well-traveled that Hajime can afford to do nothing but look at Oikawa instead of paying attention to where they're headed.

Oikawa, who looks and sounds unusually serious when he says, "That I can't give up until I'm sure that I gave my best – and not just the best I'm capable of right now."

It's good advice but before Hajime can say so, Oikawa grips his arm. They both stop mid-step: Oikawa by design, and Hajime in surprise. "Iwa-chan."

Hajime frowns. "What's wrong?" The look on Oikawa's face is very – Hajime's never seen it before. Intense and focused, but not in the way he is on court. His mouth is pressed in a thin line.

"I can't give up until I've tried my best," repeats Oikawa, but the way he says it – Hajime can't even begin to parse what he means. The only thing he can say for certain is that they're not talking about volleyball anymore. "I can't let go of something until I've tried everything that I can. I have to focus on what happens if I succeed, and not – not what happens if I fail." Oikawa's gaze is piercing. "Does that make sense, Iwa-chan? Does it make sense to you that I have to try?"

"Yeah." Hajime doesn't know why the air around them is suddenly so thick, why there is a pressure against his chest from some unseen force. He feels wrong-footed. "Yeah, it does." All that does make sense, but– "Oikawa," he says, unsure. "What are we talking about right now?"

At this, the stifling intensity radiating from Oikawa softens into

something more serene.

"Do you remember," he says, looking away from Hajime, "back in the summer, I told you I liked guys?"

Of all the things Hajime could've thought would be coming, this wasn't it. "Of course I do."

"Well, there's a specific guy." Almost blankly, Hajime takes note of the fact that Oikawa's hands had been shaking before he clenched them into fists, shoving them in his pockets. "It's you. I like you, Iwa-chan." He laughs a little. "More than like, actually."

There's staticky silence in Hajime's head.

It's you. I like you, Iwa-chan.

Hajime doesn't know what his face is doing, what his hands are doing. He sees Oikawa, still looking ahead, shoulders broad and spine straight. Hajime remembers the moment Oikawa had cited, when Oikawa had first come out to him: "You're the first person I'm telling this to, I didn't even tell nee-chan, so you can't – you can't be a jerk, okay?" How Oikawa had looked comically shocked when Hajime had punched his arm, how that awful wariness weighing at him had melted when Hajime'd followed the punch up with, "That's for thinking I'd give you shit for this." Hajime remembers that he went,

"Yeah, yeah," when Oikawa had thrown his arms around Hajime and wailed, "Iwa-chan! You do love me!" but with naked relief and gratefulness in his eyes.

Since then Oikawa had told his sister and parents, told Matsukawa and Hanamaki. Nothing much changed except that Oikawa would more freely comment on Oguri Shun's "unacceptably sexy arms" and Uncle would say, "Tooru, how're you ever going to impress a nice young man if you don't learn how to make doriyakis?" Hajime shouts of, "Stop giving him bad ideas that he'll follow through with!" increased tenfolds because Hanamaki would casually say shit like, "Five hundred yen that Oikawa's gay cherry gets popped by a dreamy physical therapist named Alejandro by July next year," to which Oikawa would retort, in the absolutely worst way possible, "Alejandro would only be so lucky to be given such a precious gift."

Nothing had changed. Hajime could have never, not in a million years, guessed that this would be coming. This confession.

Because that's what this is. Oikawa Tooru, Hajime's oldest and dearest friend, is confessing to him.

Oikawa Tooru, Hajime's oldest and dearest friend, who finally turns around to look at him. *I can't let go until I've tried everything I can.*

"Oikawa." Hajime's voice croaks. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what to say. His mind is abuzz and his throat is dry and Hajime— "Tooru. You're my best friend."

And this is the moment Hajime comes back to. The sincerity of those words on his tongue. It's the truth: Oikawa Tooru is Hajime's best friend. It's the truth, and even the whole truth – but only so because Hajime hadn't understood something fundamental about himself. About them.

Oikawa's face changes only a little, but it's enough to make Hajime feel like the worst kind of asshole. He doesn't even look surprised.

"Oikawa," he starts again, helpless, but Oikawa shakes his head.

"You don't need to say anything else," he tells Hajime before starting

to walk again. "C'mon. What were we talking about? That's right – Blanco-san. Can you believe he'll be retiring? He's only thirty-eight! They'll never drag me off the court that early, Iwa-chan, I'll throw the biggest fit if they try..."

Hajime pushes down the awful guilt and hurries to catch up. He'd think that he imagined the whole thing with how easily Oikawa starts to ramble, but there's no denying the adrenaline still coursing through Hajime's veins, the rapid pace of his heart, the goosebumps on his skin. There's no denying that the lightness of Oikawa's voice is put upon, so transparently a front that in any other situation Hajime would force the issue. *Stop pretending you're all right!* he'd yell. *You can talk to me.*

But this isn't any other situation, is it? Hajime's the last person Oikawa would want to talk about this with if he needed to, if he wanted to. What's there for either of them to gain by pushing, except the reappearance of that fleeting but awful expression on Oikawa's face? Nothing. There's nothing.

So Hajime takes hold of the lifeline Oikawa has thrown him: *you don't need to say anything else*. He holds on to that lifeline for years. At first because he doesn't know what to say, and then because he does.

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In contrast to the entire month Hajime has before he's due on his flight to California, Oikawa's only staying back for two and a half weeks before he has to go back for his regular league games. The do-nothing time Hajime had initially planned had been made without

one important consideration: that if Oikawa has a busy schedule ahead of him, then so does Hajime.

"Stop your grumbling, Iwa-chan," says Oikawa on day five, after he shows up at the house at 9am to drag him out. "Honestly, it's incredible that the League even delayed resuming the season for so long after the games. Probably the exposure in a *global publication* has something to do with it. Did I tell you that they're going to feature us in GQ Sports next month, Iwa-chan? That I'll have a whole *page* dedicated to me?"

"Only twenty times," sighs Hajime.

"I've already done my interview, yesterday," continues Oikawa. He's beaming. "And the first thing I have after I land is to go and have a photoshoot with the team. It's good that they scheduled more than our usual three days break after the closing ceremonies. Which would've been just enough time to fly back if Argentina makes it to the top four. Which," adds Oikawa, tone turning smug, "is good news for us this year, obviously, since half the country's starting line up is from San Juan."

Oikawa does have one hell of a team.

"I know," he brags when Hajime tells him so. "Only the best for Oikawa-san. That's always been the trend, huh?" There's a blooming warmth in Hajime's chest as Oikawa meaningfully nudges him with an elbow. "I still can't get over the line shot Gabriel made at the end of the second set with Brazil – it was so close, Iwa-chan, so perfect. I still get chills thinking about it. I get sweats." He's actually telling the truth, the way Hajime can see his eyes glaze over. The skin of his arms are pebbling, even under the sun. "Did you now I woke up in the middle of the night yesterday–"

Hajime shoves him before he can finish the thought. "We're in public, you freak," he scolds, the warmth from a second earlier transformed into an uncomfortable heat. "There are kids around who don't need to hear about your volleyball boners."

And, more importantly, this is *not* an image Hajime needs in his head right now but there it is anyway, forming in his mind in ultra HD:

Oikawa, gasping awake in the middle of the night. Tangled up in sheets, illuminated only in pale silver light. Skin flushed and damp. Desperate, overheated. Wanting.

"You're the one bringing up boners!" squawks Oikawa. He makes a face at Hajime that's objectively horrible but it does absolutely nothing to alleviate the feeling that's pooled in Hajime's gut. If anything, it makes it worse.

The number one thing on Oikawa's agenda is presents. It doesn't matter that Oikawa comes back to Japan at least once a year – he's always armed with a list of ideas and requests of found-only-in-Japan items from his friends back in San Juan.

"The stuff for the team's easy," he says fondly. "They always just want snacks, the animals. But Auntie Maria wants face masks and this sunscreen that costs an arm and a leg to ship internationally, and Cat – Catalina, that's Javier's daughter – anyway she's five now so I need to introduce her to gen one Pokemon before she ends up with a dumb favourite like *Braixen*, urgh, can you imagine, Iwa-chan? No, she needs a traditional Pikachu plush. Cute, round, yellow – easy. I can be talked into Cyndaquil, maybe, but I'm *not* tolerating anything beyond gen two."

"I don't know what I hate more," says Hajime. "The fact that I understood all that, or the fact that I agree with you."

"What you hate most is yourself," says Oikawa breezily. "Because that's the only reason to deny yourself the joys of your youth."

"Yeah, no, the right answer is you," and laughs at the look on Oikawa's face. "How're you gonna take all that back in your backpack?"

Oikawa eyes him with extreme prejudice. "I'm obviously going to check in a bag."

"So let me get this straight," starts Hajime. "You can go on the Shinkansen with a suitcase for your pals in Argentina, but not to come back here?"

"Got it in one, Iwa-chan!" The responding delight on Oikawa's face is pure Shittykawa. "Now let's get moving before my luck takes a turn and I run into Tobio-chan."

It's a much shorter list now than it had been the last time Hajime had gone with Oikawa on one of these trips, two years ago. Then, Oikawa needed "at least two gifts" for Juan's two sisters, his brother and sister-in-law, a brother-in-law, Juan's parents, and a small horde of nieces and nephews. It had been a particular type of torture for Hajime, who'd only just realized that what he felt for Oikawa wasn't at all definable within the neat boundaries of friendship. But that's what they were as far as the rules went. This is how they always were. And so Hajime had gone.

This time isn't like that. In fact, time spent with Oikawa here has a kind of lived-in ease to it. There's none of the bustle from the times Oikawa had made the trip to see Hajime in Irvine, or when Hajime flew to San Juan. This is settling into something they'd done for years before they'd both left Japan and the first ten, eleven days fly by. The evenings are usually saved for their families, but during the days Hajime goes with Oikawa to track down his highly specific presents in the mornings and Oikawa pops in during an afternoon to help Hajime put up the shelves Mom and Dad had been procrastinating on. They get ramen, plant a maple in the Oikawas' yard at Auntie's request. They swing past Aoba Johsai for old times' sake and immediately get recognized and accosted by their current volleyball team.

It's been longer than Hajime wants to admit since it's been just – just them. Not literally and not all the time – their friends from Seijoh wouldn't let that happen: the height of it reached during the get together Yahaba and Hanamaki cobbled together in Watari's apartment last weekend which ended with Hajime nursing the kind of hangover that he hasn't had since the regrettable celebration at one of the undergrad frats after his last final at Irvine – but there's no denying the rhythm they've found themselves back in.

More than that – this is the first time that Hajime doesn't feel that hot coil of guilt for noticing things like the tendons on Oikawa's neck when he throws his head back and laughs, how often he bites his lower lip in thought, the sly slant of his mouth and the impish gleam

in his eyes when he's being particularly, *purposely* aggravating. Maybe Hajime still should – Oikawa is still only weeks out of a long-term relationship, a relationship that by Oikawa's own admission was ready, emotionally, for a lifelong commitment – but Hajime's got enough regret when it comes to Oikawa that he isn't going to pile on more for something like this.

For a couple of days after Hajime's stupid phone call, Hajime's been wary. After all, it would be completely within Juan's rights to expose Hajime after what he'd pulled – but nothing comes out of it. Nothing about Oikawa even hints to him knowing. Oikawa doesn't bring up Juan or the break-up again.

Not that that means a whole lot. Over the next few days, Hajime collects numerous pieces of evidence that Oikawa's not over it. The most obvious of which is when he'd caught Oikawa thumbing through old photos of them in his phone as he waited for Hajime, sitting on a bench in Kotodai Park. It had made Hajime hesitate for a second, but he quickly realized that it would probably be weirder if he didn't follow through with the scare he had planned for Oikawa after managing to get so close unnoticed. It had been the right decision: Oikawa's shriek when Hajime had lunged at him from behind – and the subsequent look of angry betrayal – had been top five material.

And if the unintended consequence of that was finding out that Oikawa wasn't quite as all right as he'd have everyone believe so Hajime could keep a closer eye on him – then that's all the better.

-

"Hey," Oikawa says to him, at the tail end of one of their shopping trips. This is the only time Hajime's leading the way, trying to find

the last of the extremely specific list of novelty snacks David – Hajime's closest friend, pre-girlfriend roommate, and main stressor of Hajime's life in California – had demanded. "Can you come by around five today? Takeru's done with exams and is staying at the house for a couple days before flying out to Boston. He wants to talk to you about school stuff."

"Yeah, okay," says Hajime. Takeru is in his first year at Tokyo Tech, and has probably just wrapped up his summer semester. With Oikawa's parents in Sendai and Hiromi nee-san having joined Hitoshi-san in the States after getting Takeru settled into the dorms in the spring, Hajime had been assigned as Takeru's "emergency local contact" back in May.

"You'll be to Takeru what Blanco-san was for me," Oikawa had said brightly. "But the poor man's version, which is exactly what Takeru deserves. The Tooru-lite experience."

Takeru was pretty self-sufficient though. The only time he made use of Hajime's LINE was to call him in the middle of the night after finding himself drunk and confused at Osanbashi pier. The entire incident could be summarized with Takeru going, "Uh, I fucked up and would really appreciate if you could come get me and never mention this to anyone in my family," and Hajime saying, "you goddamn idiot, don't go near the water and stay put, I'm coming," and then Takeru stubbornly staring at his feet while Hajime gave him the chewing out of a lifetime.

He'd finished off his lecture with, "You know I have to tell Tooru about this," and the look of abject horror on his face was – it was something. "No way!" Takeru had said vehemently. "I'll call my dad, but you CANNOT tell Tooru-ji. Or Mom!" which – well. As far as threats go, it had the best possible outcome.

When Hajime arrives at the Oikawa household as promised, Oikawa answers the door and shouts, "Takeru, some thug is here asking for you!" and is rewarded with a smack across the head from Hajime and a kick in the shins from Takeru approximately twenty seconds later.

"So this is why you go to Iwa-chan for help instead of the more superior option," Oikawa accuses, scowling. "Because you're both

violent animals."

"No, it's because you don't know how the real world works," says Takeru flatly.

"I entered the workforce before either of you!" Oikawa yells as he goes upstairs, presumably to his room. "Have fun with your nerd talk!"

Takeru watches him go with a haunted look on his face. "Every day I wonder how I'm related to that guy."

"And then you remember your mom," finishes Hajime.

"And then I remember my mom," agrees Takeru, resigned.

It turns out what Takeru wants to talk about is internships. He's studying to be an engineer, which is nowhere near Hajime's industry, but Takeru seems to have a great deal of trust in Hajime's assessment of Japan's post-high school education system and his opinions on whether to do concurrent work-study (absolutely not, unless he *wants* to burn out) or alternate between work and study terms (excellent, and necessary in today's professional landscape).

Hajime remembers Hiromi nee-san helping him and Oikawa during senior year of high school, and then just Hajime when Oikawa had declared his intentions to forego higher education. "Well, I'm glad I can provide my valuable life experiences to help the more sensible of the next generation," Hiromi told him with that blinding smile that was part of the Oikawa family legacy. It was so great of Hiromi to answer all his questions, and it's kind of nice that Hajime can do the same now for her kid.

Afterward, Takeru looks down at his hands and says, "And, uh, I wanted to say thanks again for helping me out that time. You know. And not saying anything. I haven't had anything like that happen again."

"Good," says Hajime, wondering when he became an old man, qualified to be giving such judgments. A voice in his head that sounds exactly like Oikawa answers, *you've been eighty since you were*

ten, Iwa-chan. "Though I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Probably for the best that you have a bad memory," is Takeru's response, proving that the Oikawa genes are strong and present, no matter how much he takes after his dad.

Takeru is meeting with some high school friends for dinner. Uncle Oikawa complains about the youth and uses that as an excuse to get Hajime to stay instead. Not that he has to: Uncle makes his special udon that night, and Hajime devours three bowls in the time it takes the rest of them to finish one.

Eating with the Oikawas means Hajime only gets the opportunity to talk every other minute and he makes *use* of that opportunity every five. Usually it's prompted with Auntie saying, "Hajime-kun, do you see what I have to live with?" with a look of extreme fondness on her face, or Oikawa going, "Iwa-chan! Back me up, here!" followed by Hajime doing the exact opposite. Nobody asks him what Takeru wanted to talk about, which warms him even more than the inadvisable amount of noodles he puts away.

After all that, Hajime is in no condition to watch the three hours of Brotherhood that Oikawa had scheduled. His eyes grow heavy within the first ten minutes, blinks growing longer and longer until they can no longer be called blinks. Hajime has definitely entered nap territory.

It's a disgrace, really, that Hajime's passing out while Ling Yao and Lan Fan are kicking ass on the monitor attached to Oikawa's laptop. There's nothing to be done about it though: vacation Hajime wears sweatpants and shorts and comfortable t-shirts. His stomach is full and warm from the three bowls of Uncle's udon he'd scarfed down. He's sprawled over the futon Oikawa never put away that morning, and it smells indulgently of him with every breath. Oikawa's on the floor just a foot away – lying on his stomach, murmuring little reactions to himself as he keeps his eyes on the show.

If Hajime had to describe the perfect condition where he feels the most comfortable and at ease – it's this.

Oikawa pokes his side. "Iwa-chan's been missing his beauty sleep for

too many years, huh?"

"Shut up," he mutters, out of instinct at this point. He bats Oikawa's hand away. "M just resting my eyes."

"Uh huh." Oikawa sounds like he's stifling a laugh.

Hajime groans and rolls over, placing the pillow above his head. "Gimme ten minutes. Ten minutes, Oikawa. Then we can finish watching."

Oikawa huffs. "Ten minutes! Hah. I know what that means." He grumbles the words, but it sounds more playful than annoyed. Hajime relaxes even more, lets himself be tugged into sleep.

The next thing he knows he's startling awake to the pale light of early dawn.

It's a good thing that the ceiling of Oikawa's room is so familiar. It's also good that Hajime's woken up in this exact situation countless times as a teenager. He blearily pulls out his phone to check the time – a half past five – and a notification of an unread text:

[Dad]

10:14pm: Tooru-kun texted saying you fell asleep LOL [attached: IMG2098]

The attached is, of course, the most unflattering photo possible of Hajime's sleeping face.

When he rolls over to his other side, Hajime finds Oikawa – asleep on one of the extra futons Auntie keeps neatly piled in Oikawa's old closet, his long limbs curled up under a thin, summer blanket. A blanket that's the twin to the one Hajime has draped over him. One

that hadn't been there when Hajime'd been conscious and melting into sleep. Oikawa must've brought it out.

The particularly disgruntled snore that startled Hajime into consciousness seems to have been a one-off because Oikawa's now back to taking in slow, deep breaths. For a minute, Hajime just looks at him. At the fall of his hair, the slope of his nose, the sweep of his lashes. The slight part of his mouth. His cheek is squashed against his futon because he's clutching his pillow in his arms. And while Oikawa's one of those infuriating people whose genes already put them at the top tier of attractiveness without trying, Hajime's learned over the years that most people don't look particularly great while they're sleeping. It's very hard when you've got no control over what your face is doing.

In sleep, what Oikawa looks is – he looks at ease. Soft. Within reach. And maybe it's because of the early morning, maybe it's because there's nothing to distract Hajime, nothing to do except lie three feet away from Oikawa and take him in – maybe it's the last few days of being reminded time and time again why Oikawa's very existence made Hajime's arrival to this point inevitable – but whatever the reason, the outcome is that the sight of him has Hajime ache in a way that is as sweet as it is agonizing.

If Hajime had been in love before, it hadn't felt like this. With anyone else but Oikawa, he doesn't see how it ever could.

-

Hajime thinks he's doing a pretty good job at keeping his whole Oikawa situation under control. Or he does, until dinner with Matsukawa and Hanamaki Thursday night – exactly one week before Oikawa's due to fly back – when that illusion is thoroughly shattered.

Because Hanamaki and Yahaba had pulled something together for their larger collection of friends from Seijoh last weekend, Hajime experiences none of the chaos of having to arrange catch-ups himself. Something smaller with their little group of four is the only thing Hajime takes responsibility in making sure takes place. They're in a bustling yakiniku that Matsukawa swears by, plates of bite-sized, ready-to-grill meats between them.

"I will SUE you," threatens Oikawa when Matsukawa makes a Twitter handle right in front of them for the sole purpose of posting horrific candid photos of Oikawa. "I have a lawyer! I know my rights, Mattsun. I'm a minor in those pictures – I'm going to get you arrested, don't think I won't–"

"I'll take that chance, I think." Matsukawa is, as he's always been, unbothered by Oikawa's antics as he scrolls through his phone. "If it means @dailyoikawafails gets the viral life it deserves."

"You've got enough stuff to post everyday?"

"That's not helpful, Iwa-chan!"

"I wasn't trying to be," says Hajime, and Oikawa makes an offended little noise before swiftly lifting the three slices of beef Hajime had been waiting on and stuffing them in his mouth in retaliation. Hajime's smirk immediately melts into a scowl. "Oi, Shittykawa!"

Oikawa's cheeks are as round as a particularly gluttonous chipmunk's. He makes hard eye-contact with Hajime as he determinedly chews.

"I'm going to go through all the photo albums in my house," says Hajime, "and give every embarrassing picture of you to Matsukawa."

"Nah," says Matsukawa. "I've got enough for three years, at least."

Hanamaki nods. "Yeah, no need to break your vows, Iwaizumi," which is a weird fucking thing to say, but before Hajime can question it, Hanamaki continues, "We all knew that Captain was eventually gonna be an Olympic medalist. I've got pictures going back to 2009 that I'm saving for a rainy day."

"Makki!" Oikawa glares at him. "When they make a movie out of my life," he promises, "I'm going to make sure they cast the ugliest losers to play this group of clowns."

"As long as Iwaizumi's the ugliest of those clowns," says Matsukawa sagely, which is such a rapid change from the past five minutes of piling on Oikawa that Hajime sputters, "What the hell?"

"You were getting too comfortable," Hanamaki informs him. "There aren't any *sides* here, Iwaizumi."

Oikawa starts to howl with laughter. "Oh ho ho ho," he cackles. "How does it feel, Iwa-chan? This is what happens when you make the mistake thinking you've got any loyalty in this group."

Sometime around the sixth plate, Oikawa gets a call reportedly about his cursed cat – "Oh, I actually have to take this," Oikawa says. "It's from my auntie who's watching Kaijuu-chan – *Buenos días, tía Camilla! Dame un segundo, por favor* – Iwa-chan, let me out of the booth, I can't hear anything in here."

The second Oikawa's out of earshot, Hanamaki zeroes in on Hajime. "Dude," he says. "Iwaizumi, man. What are you doing?"

Hajime, in the middle of placing the next batch on the grill, pauses. "...Grilling beef?"

"He means those eyes you're making at Oikawa," says Matsukawa. "You gotta stop."

There is a span of two seconds where Hajime hears the words, understands the words, understands what it means – but there's a disconnect between his brain processing and it manifesting into any kind of physical reaction, voluntary or otherwise.

And then it slams into him. Horror and mortification, made so much worse by how much he hadn't been expecting to be called out by *Hanamaki* and *Matsukawa* – despite Hajime having assumed they'd figured out at least some parts of it. They're regrettably observant even with Hajime never having breathed a word of what went down – not Oikawa's confession in high school, and certainly not Hajime's

own realization years later – but to bring it up while Oikawa was due to come back any minute is just.

"Uh," says Hajime. His chopsticks are still hovering in the air. "Uh, what?"

"Unless you want him to know," amends Matsukawa. "In which case, good luck and godspeed. You'll need it."

"*What?*" repeats Hajime, but louder.

Hanamaki looks at the two of them disbelievingly. "Friends, brothers... we've all seen Oikawa pick up. He's not a blind monk. You think he'd have that kind of success rate if there wasn't some kind of strategy on who he goes after? You think he doesn't know what it looks like when a guy wants at his dick?" Hanamaki looks upset as he hears himself speak, which Hajime can relate with. He gives Hajime a dirty look. "I can't believe you made me say that."

"I didn't make you do shit." Hajime finally finds his ability to speak. His face feels as though it's on fire. "And I'm not making eyes at—"

"You are," says Matsukawa, consoling. "Though I contest Hanamaki's claim that Oikawa's picked up on it."

"Whatever. The point is that this guy—" Hanamaki points accusingly at Hajime— "You need to get it together. You *caress his hand* every time you want him to look at you! You keep filling up his water! You're picking out the best pieces and putting them on his side of the – oh, wipe that look off your face, man. Of course I noticed. You're not being subtle. I told you. I don't even – you look like you want him to give you his second button. That's what it's come down to. You look like you want to hold his hand, and make him dinner, and then rail him through—"

"You finish that sentence, Hanamaki," says Hajime, face hot and heart hammering furiously in his chest— "and I'm gonna knock all your teeth out—"

Matsukawa makes a placating gesture with his hands. "Let's get back on track. What Hanamaki means—"

"You his official translator now?" snaps Hajime. "What are the two of you trying to get at?"

Didn't they all have a tacit understanding that they don't bring this kind of shit up? That even if they all knew what was going on, it was the bare minimum level of decency. It's like averting your eyes when someone was getting dumped in public. The situation already sucks enough without having these idiots give their commentary.

Hanamaki looks up at the ceiling, as though asking it for guidance. Or patience. Or the ability to teleport out of this conversation. Those are certainly the things Hajime's praying for right now.

Finally, Hanamaki says, "So I think we can all agree that I'd rather jump out a window than have a sincere conversation."

"I'd jump out a window if it meant not having *this* conversation," says Hajime. Then he corrects, "No I wouldn't. I'd rather shove you out the window instead," but Hanamaki ignores this threat.

"I'm allergic to sentiment and self-reflection," he continues. "It goes against my nature. I once pretended to pass out when my girlfriend – well, ex-girlfriend now, semantics – brought up moving in together and was ready to sell how I was actually diabetic the whole time–"

"That's unhinged," says Matsukawa, but he doesn't look or sound as disturbed as Hajime feels. If anything he sounds a little proud.

"Thanks, buddy, you know how I try," says Hanamaki. Then, turning back to Hajime, "So please appreciate what a rare and precious thing it is that I'm spending my thimbleful of genuine human emotion to say: I hope you know what you're doing, Iwaizumi. I've known you two bozos long enough now that I actually want to see whatever – this – is –" Hanamaki makes a vague gesture towards Hajime and the empty spot beside him where Oikawa had been sitting, "–end in something other than a massacre."

That's–

That's just–

"That's the most asshole way you could've possibly said all that," says

Hajime, once he's ninety-percent certain he unpacked the weirdly considerate sentiment underneath the seven layers of bullshit. "What's wrong with you?"

"Uh, that question needs more time to answer than the thirty seconds we've got before Oikawa comes back, so let's just go for the easier one instead: d'you know what you're doing, Iwaizumi?"

A loaded question. If these two can be believed, Hajime doesn't even know what his *face* is doing. Oikawa isn't someone Hajime had ever had to take up careful self-reflection to know how to act with – it had always been clear. Be his friend, support him unconditionally. Knock his head straight when his brain latches onto stupid ideas. Tell him off when he's being an ass, *be* told off when Hajime's being the same. Oikawa had spoiled Hajime in some ways – he's been there so long and so faithfully that there was never any doubt that whatever Hajime instinctively did or said was exactly the thing that Oikawa wanted him to do.

Even when those instincts changed – it had still been clear, hadn't it? When those instincts had his eyes linger at the pillow creases pressed into Oikawa's cheek, had his fingers itching to sink into Oikawa's hair, had the air go heavy in his lungs with want to be near him. Even then Hajime still didn't have to think about what to do around Oikawa. He knew – he knew he had to keep it tucked away, somewhere quiet and unobtrusive. Even in this Oikawa had spoiled him – by letting Hajime learn him, to know him so thoroughly, so completely over the years that there was never a question that Oikawa wouldn't want Hajime to act on these new instincts. Not when Oikawa had woken these instincts in someone else just months earlier. Had given him permission to be free with them. An implicit confirmation that advances wouldn't be welcomed from anyone else.

Now, with Oikawa theoretically unattached and Hajime as in love with him as ever – the answer is still clear.

"There isn't going to be a massacre," Hajime finally says. *I would've said yes*, Oikawa had told Hajime. *Of course I would've. I probably would've gotten to asking first.* "I'm not planning on doing anything. Or saying anything. He just got out of a – and I don't even know if he–"

Hajime stops. What is he doing, trying to explain himself as though this isn't the obvious choice? "Whatever. We can bury this conversation, now."

But Hanamaki says, "Iwaizumi. I'm not saying you shouldn't shoot your shot."

"Uh, yeah you are? But I'm with you, so—"

"No, man – what I'm saying is that your face is *already* doing the talking and you gotta follow up or follow through because no matter what this guy says—" Hanamaki points a thumb to Matsukawa—"Oikawa definitely—"

"—is heading back," Matsukawa says, and the blood drains out of Hajime's face.

Thankfully, Matsukawa turns out to be a reliable lookout because there's a whole three seconds before Oikawa's popping up at Hajime's shoulder and announcing, "You'll all be delighted to know Kaijuu-chan will continue to terrorize the good people of San Juan for a long and healthy life. Iwa-chan, scoot inside, will you—" He pokes at Hajime's side until Hajime slides inside into the booth, where Oikawa had originally been sitting.

Almost helplessly, Hajime thinks, *Fuck you, Hanamaki*. Because now that Hanamaki has pointed it out, had said that Hajime's face does the talking for him – Hajime can sense it happening. He can feel the muscles of his jaw relax when he glances at Oikawa. He can feel the corners of his eyes soften as his gaze settles on Oikawa's profile with the kind of heavy finality that means it'll be a struggle to pull it away.

There's no two ways about it: Hajime's face really is a traitorous bastard.

"So what'd I miss?" Oikawa is asking. He knocks his knee against Hajime's in acknowledgment for letting him steal Hajime's seat. It's subtler than the bright, self-satisfied smile Oikawa used to direct at Hajime when they were younger, when he'd whine and pout and hassle until he got Hajime to accept his fate – when it had been less

of, *thanks for letting me have my way*, and more of, *Iwa-chan finally remembered that I'm supposed to get my way, always*.

It hits Hajime unexpectedly hard, the hugeness of this seemingly small shift. How this bare minimum courtesy might've been welcome – a relief – if he hadn't realized the kind of things he wanted from Oikawa. That he *wanted* Oikawa to feel entitled to Hajime's surrender in these every day, inconsequential things in a way he didn't with anyone else. Was it because Oikawa had wanted this too? All those years ago when Hajime had been unprepared for what was being offered because he was still hundreds of pages and thousands of days away from understanding? After all, it had always been Hajime – and only Hajime – Oikawa had pulled this shit with.

"Just us shittalking you," says Matsukawa.

Oikawa narrows his eyes. His knee is still grazing Hajime's. "Guess that's what happens when you're all obsessed with me, huh?"

Hanamaki gives him a look. He doesn't have to say, *some of us more than others*, for Hajime to read it off his face.

-

Back in the day, the four of them would've headed *back* together, not just headed *out*. Matsukawa and Hanamaki hadn't lived quite as close to Hajime's as Oikawa did, but they all shared the same closest train station. But they both live deeper into the city now and Hajime knows that Hanamaki's parents had moved further into the country a couple years back to be nearer to relatives while Matsukawa's family were still around in Miyagi. If he had to compare that with the fact that the Iwaizumis and Oikawas have been in the same neighbourhood, the same two houses just down the street from each other for more than twenty years – it's pretty obvious which one is

weirder.

But not worse. Definitely not worse. Hajime's early twenties taught him a hell of a lot on a number of things, and one of those lessons had been about home: how it's people, yes, but it's also – it's also a space. Four walls and a roof that leeches the tension right out of you the second you get inside its hold. A place to house those people that you want to build a life with, around. For someone who's been hopping around from place to place since the second he finished high school, Hajime's got a metric ton of embarrassing sentiments about putting down roots. This little plot of land in Miyagi was where Hajime was born and cared for and nurtured, made into a person. There's a story in every wall and every room of the house, every square inch of grass on the small yard. Each of those stories are fundamental building blocks of Hajime.

Nothing puts Hajime so at ease than the feeling of stepping through his parents' front door – breathing in the gardenia scented candles Mom uses to drown out the lingering smell of fried okonomiyaki – so comforting and familiar that it's as much a part of him as his bones.

Well.

Except for seeing Oikawa's face in person, after months of only seeing it through a screen.

So it's fitting, in a way, that this is still the same: getting into the train with Oikawa and taking the same route home they always have from the station. Oikawa is not quite tipsy from the couple drinks he worked through at the yakiniku – closer to happily buzzed. The streetlights show up as little stars in his eyes. Hajime tracks the slight flush to his cheeks, the tips of his ears. He's walking with his hands shoved into his pockets.

It's criminal to look this good while walking down a quiet suburban street in just shorts and a t-shirt. Oikawa's whole existence really is a slap in the face to every other person alive.

Oikawa's heading out with his parents tomorrow morning at four for a long weekend in Kyoto. "How is it that they only ever want to go there?" Oikawa is saying. "Every time I make a suggestion, it's

always, 'Why don't we make another road trip to Kyoto, honey?' even though we'll lose two days on the drive! I offered to take them to this nice onsen in Akita this time—"

"That's kinda weird," says Hajime, who had known about Kyoto for weeks but not about this alternative Oikawa had been considering.

"Why's it weird?" demands Oikawa.

"I shouldn't have to explain why it's weird to sit around taking baths with your parents, Shittykawa."

"Families go all the time!"

"Yeah, families with *little kids*. You're a grown ass man."

"I can't believe how completely I've lost Iwa-chan to the Americans," complains Oikawa. "You've forgotten your culture, your *roots*."

"Says the Argentine citizen." Hajime smirks when Oikawa sticks out his tongue in response. It's been his go-to move when faced with imminent loss in their banter since he was eight: when he'd dropped from being one-hundred percent adorable to only fifty, with the balance going into being an annoying shit.

And to think that Hajime's been gone for him longer than that. He has to shove that thought aside if he wants to continue this conversation. "You can take them in the winter," he says. "Your sister's coming back then, yeah? If you could get her on board—"

"Which I would," says Oikawa airily, with the confidence of a baby brother who's been doted on and loved to death his whole life.

"Then your mom's gonna crack in two seconds with both of you ganging up on her."

Oikawa gives him a suspicious glance. "There's no way Mom's the weak link in this operation."

Hajime's known the Oikawas enough to know that Auntie is the easier target, but she's so admirably talented at hiding that softness that her son's never picked up on it. It's one of those weird blind

spots Oikawa has that makes it even more impressive that he's so unnervingly eagle-eyed about everything else. Like everything else with Oikawa, that too had been a hard earned skill.

Still: Hajime wouldn't be Hajime if he didn't say, "Yeah, I'm just setting you up for failure."

"Maybe Iwa-chan should leave the setting to the professionals since he's obviously no good at it," says Oikawa with a 'hmph.'

Shittykawa's a career provocateur and Hajime really should know better – and yet Hajime literally, physically cannot stop himself from shoving him.

Oikawa stumbles a little, but looks incredibly pleased at the minimal effect Hajime's push had.

"Gotta try harder than that, Iwa-chan," he says, smug. But then his face clears into something more serious. "Actually, big sis just told us a couple days ago that she can't make the trip here for New Year's. So the rest of us are flying to Boston instead."

"Oh," says Hajime, blinking. That means– "That'll make this the first winter you won't be back."

"Yeah." The smile on Oikawa's face is rueful. "Guess the streak was gonna break at some point, huh?"

The end of a seven year streak starting from the very first year Oikawa left Japan. And if he's not back this winter, then Oikawa probably won't be back to Japan until the following December. That's sixteen months from now.

Of course, Hajime's sure he'll see Oikawa before then – Oikawa's had a week set aside during his offseason to fly up to California since Hajime had moved there. And unlike trips back home, Hajime actually does more than laze around his apartment when Oikawa visits: one year they spent the entire time in San Francisco, then the next hopping between beach towns along the coast – Hajime at the wheel and Oikawa brazenly shuffling through Hajime's playlists and commenting on how terrible Hajime's music collection is. Then there

was that one memorable summer while Hajime was in grad school when they'd backpacked through Yosemite with Hajime's friends. Oikawa had almost fallen off a goddamn cliff because he'd been trying to capture "the perfect sunset, Iwa-chan, look at it! That's the kind of picture worth dying for." After that, Hajime had been ready to push Oikawa off the cliff himself and only Raj's thirty-pound weight advantage had prevented the Shittykawacide from happening.

Then there are all the times Hajime's flown to San Juan for Oikawa's birthday. When Hajime met up with him in Brazil after an international tournament, or those times when Oikawa's offseason in Japan coincided with Hajime's paltry vacation days.

But New Year's has been a fixed point of reunion for the two of them since the start. And it's normal for these things to change as the years go on, Hajime knows. It's what happens when you have independent lives. Hajime's had an inkling of this coming since he heard the news from Oikawa last July that Hiromi would be moving to the States to join her husband once Takeru started university. Hitoshi-san, Oikawa's brother-in-law, had already been there for two out of his required five years by that point and it hadn't been an ideal set-up for anybody. Hajime and Oikawa might be *like* family, but they're – they're not. They're best friends. And it'd be crazy of Oikawa to reduce the limited time he already has with his family in two different points of the world because Hajime's at a third point on the map.

It's already crazy that they even managed it so far. And even if they can keep it going for a little while longer, Hajime's not stupid enough to think that it'll be forever.

"Think you'll be able to spare a couple days in California on your way up to Boston?" he asks, voice rough, and it takes a second to realize that Oikawa's stopped walking. That he's no longer beside Hajime.

When Hajime turns back to look at him, Oikawa is already staring back.

Despite the warmth of the summer night, a chill wracks through Hajime's bones when he meets Oikawa's gaze. Oikawa's eyes have always been like this, thinks Hajime. Staggeringly beautiful, and never more so than when they're blazing through and dismantling the defences of his team and opponents alike.

Right now they're blazing through Hajime's.

"What?" he asks, uneasy. "What's with that face, Shittykawa?"

"Iwa-chan," Oikawa says his name quietly. Hajime has heard every possible variation of *Iwa-chan* come out of Oikawa's mouth. He's heard it shouted in fury, whined in petulance, sighed with affection, screamed with joy. Hajime's heard it all from him because it's a name that is securely and solely Oikawa's in the same way Hajime's heart is, in its entirety – but Hajime has never heard him say it like this.

The hairs on Hajime's arms start to rise.

"What is it?" he repeats and as soon as the words take form, a thought hits Hajime with no warning, blooming fully formed:

He knows.

Oikawa knows the only secret Hajime's kept from him.

Oikawa knows, and that's why he's looking at Hajime like that.

Unbidden, he remembers Juan say, *Tooru, he is too observant*. He sees

too much. Juan would know: he'd seen every part of Oikawa, even the parts that Hajime never had the privilege to. Oikawa's eyes are clear and sharp and unrelenting.

Abruptly, there's a shift in atmospheric pressure. That's what it feels like to Hajime – a physical change pushing against the bounds of his body. Every breath is suddenly thicker, and there's a crackling of electric potential gathering in the air. It could be a prelude to an unexpected summer storm, except that the star-scattered sky is painfully clear. Beyond the deafening drumming of his fast racing heart, Hajime's sure that the only place where in the next few vital moments there will be hail and thunder is inside of him.

There's only three, maybe four steps between them. Oikawa strikes one of them off, and it's all Hajime can do to not instinctively move back and add it back in. It's the smart, *sensible* thing to do when Oikawa's coming towards him with that unparalleled, single-minded intensity – but Hajime stays in place.

Oikawa takes another step and Hajime's mouth goes desert dry.

"Tooru," he rasps. "What're you doing?" Hajime looks at the face he knows better than any other, and the only conclusion his mind comes to in response to his own question is too farfetched, the fulfillment of such an absurd fantasy that it can't possibly, possibly–

But there Oikawa is, blinking once, twice, before bridging the space between them. Oikawa says, "Taking a long fucking shot," and before Hajime fully processes this, before he can say, *what the hell does that even mean* – Oikawa has one hand on Hajime's shoulder. The other goes to cradle the back of Hajime's head, his thumb hot against Hajime's cheek.

Oikawa murmurs, "Stop me if I'm reading this wrong, Iwa-chan," and time slows down to an improbable pace as Oikawa–

leans forward–

and

kisses him.

-

Oikawa is kissing Hajime.

Oikawa is kissing him. On the same sidewalk they've walked a thousand times, on the outskirts of their quiet neighbourhood, underneath the golden yellow street light – Oikawa is kissing him. Hajime's heart lurches – in exhilaration, in disbelief, in frightened confusion – even as every single one of his muscles freeze in place.

The press of Oikawa's lips is firm. The thing about kisses is that

there'll always be something soft about it and there's no denying that the give of Oikawa's mouth is dizzyingly soft. He's warm and insistent. The lingering traces of Oikawa's stupidly expensive shampoo is overwhelming from this close. It's horribly tempting – but not more so than the smell of his skin, so fundamentally *Oikawa* that it's awareness makes something heady and hot flare low in Hajime's belly.

The heel of Oikawa's palm is a brand against the skin of Hajime's neck. Oikawa's eyes had fluttered close right as he'd leaned in, but Hajime's are open wide: he stares at the dark fan of Oikawa's eyelashes, the way the streetlights cast shadows on his handsome face.

Hajime's thrown everything he had at never letting himself think about this. He's pummeled down the particularly stubborn bursts of his traitorous imagination within seconds of it running amok. He has looked at Oikawa with want, has spent countless hours understanding why being in love with Oikawa is part of the bedrock of his existence – but Hajime's never let himself think about the possibility of the two of them *together*. He couldn't. Not when it wouldn't amount to anything. Not when their time for that had come and gone and Hajime had been too stupid to grab on to it. Not when he's accepted that it's more important to keep their friendship, instead of twisting it into something else from being resentful of the pieces of Oikawa he couldn't fully have.

And this, happening, now, on the heels of Oikawa breaking up with someone he was ready to spend the rest of his life with–

Very carefully, Hajime places his hands on Oikawa's chest and nudges him back.

For an instant, Oikawa's grip on him tightens. Hajime feels the sharp pull of Oikawa's fingers tugging the hair from his scalp. But then he answers Hajime's silent request and slowly pulls away. Hajime hadn't realized how close Oikawa had been standing. Not until the heat of him moves away with him.

"What was that?" Hajime's voice comes out as a croak. "Why'd you – why'd you kiss me?"

Oikawa slowly takes another step back.

That warm, intent look has disappeared from Oikawa's face. What's left in its place is unreadable, and yet familiar – a language Hajime has a name for but has never picked up. He knows what Oikawa looks like when he's shutting gates and locking them. When it's more important to swiftly hide the truth of his thoughts than to do it with finesse or subtlety.

Hajime half expects this mask to slide into Oikawa's bullshit one. He has an all too-clear image of it in his mind's eye: Oikawa breaking out into that bright, false smile as he says, "Hah! Gotcha there, didn't I, Iwa-chan?"

But that doesn't come.

"I don't know, Iwa-chan." Oikawa is trying to go for something light and careless, but there's no denying how upset he sounds. "Use your head for once in your life. Why would someone kiss someone else?"

Hajime's shock and confusion is giving way to something hotter, more dangerous. A mean Oikawa isn't one Hajime often has to deal with. At least, not one that's mean to *Hajime*.

"I'm not kidding around." The words are too harsh and forgiving for such a quiet street. "This isn't a fucking joke."

"Do you see me laughing?" Oikawa shakes his head. "I was so sure," he murmurs to himself. "I was so sure that you'd–"

"That I'd what?" says Hajime sharply. "Be okay with being some kind of rebound?"

"What?"

The anger that had become the dominant force, pinching Oikawa's face and curling his fists and stiffening his shoulders – it all vanishes into a well of such immense shock and incredulity that Hajime would laugh if it wasn't the furthest thing from funny.

What had Hanamaki said earlier? *You think Oikawa hasn't noticed? Your face is doing the talking for you.* So maybe Oikawa had seen

something in the way Hajime looks at him. But even so – even so, he doesn't think Oikawa would be so callous with him if he knew the full extent of it. No, not just thinks, he *knows* this.

Oikawa's just. He's not like that. He's too loyal, too devoted, usually to his own detriment. "Obviously I'd choose Seijoh every time," Oikawa had said after their third and final failed chance at qualifying for Nationals, as though he wasn't the best, the most phenomenal player in their prefecture and would be the darling of their year right alongside Ushijima if he'd just gone to another school. Oikawa's pride extends to everything he considers his, and Seijoh would always be Oikawa's in the same way Hajime is. "If you don't pick up the phone when I call – no, I don't care if it's the middle of the night or you're in the middle of writing an exam – then I'm going to fly back to Japan just to jump-serve a volleyball straight into your stupid face," Oikawa had threatened after Hajime'd let him go from a too-tight hug at the Oikawas' driveway, car packed with the most essential parts of Oikawa's life he would be lugging across the ocean.

No. Oikawa can't know that Hajime loves him the way he loves the falling autumn leaves and sinking into bed after an exhausting day and spiking one of Oikawa's perfect sets for the game winning point. Oikawa can't know. He wouldn't have put them in this situation if he did. And if he doesn't know, but he did see something on Hajime, then–

"What?" Oikawa repeats. He still looks winded. He's still looking at Hajime with that confused disbelief. "You thought that I'd – is that what you think of me?" And if Oikawa started off sounding upset, now he just sounds furious. He proves it in the next second: "You unimaginably stupid, knuckleheaded, award-winning, record-breaking *moron*–"

"Watch it," says Hajime. "I'm trying to be serious–"

"Yeah, seriously *dumb*. I can't believe you'd say – that you'd think something that's so off the mark that it's an insult to the fact that you've got a brain at all. A rebound!" Oikawa says it the way he used to say *genius*: with disgust and bitterness and fury. "Obviously you're not – you're Iwa-chan. You're – how could you ever be some kind of replacement?"

And just like that, Oikawa's fury disappears. It's such a sudden, abrupt change that Hajime feels off balance.

As carefully as he knows how, Hajime says, "Oikawa... You're just out of a three year relationship. You would've gotten married."

Oikawa's expression wavers. The sight of it burns instantly into Hajime's mind and he tries to ignore the horrible lump that's made a home in his throat. It doesn't matter how quickly Oikawa buries that crack. It doesn't matter that Oikawa is scowling fiercely as he demands, "What does that have to do with anything?"

What does that have to do with – is Oikawa out of his mind?

"It's barely been a month," says Hajime slowly. "You were in love with him. Are you seriously trying to tell me you've moved on?"

"Of course I haven't," snaps Oikawa. Hajime reels back at the force of it. If Oikawa's self-aware enough to know this, then *why*– "I'm not some kind of robot. Obviously that kind of thing – I'm not an idiot. I know it takes a long time to get over that kind of thing, okay? I know that it might never go away. But that doesn't mean I'm not serious. It doesn't mean that I'm – trying to pick you up."

He looks and sounds sick as he says this. "You're Iwa-can," he repeats, sounding lost, frustrated. "You asked me why I kissed you and it's because I meant it and I thought that you – it wasn't because I'm *on the rebound*."

Hajime doesn't have to ask what Oikawa meant. And maybe Oikawa thinks he does, but that doesn't change the facts. Oikawa's own words just confirmed something that, until now, had only been an inferral in Hajime's head: that Oikawa he isn't over what happened. Some part of him is still bleeding.

But Hajime doesn't have it in him to be – to be the gauze that's necessary to soak up the blood, the stitches that hold him together while he heals. Essential, but only for a short period of time. Essential only until Oikawa's whole again.

"Of course I meant it," repeats Oikawa, this time quieter. "Do you

think I'd make a move on someone who already rejected me once if I didn't mean it? Do you think this would be happening if it was anyone other than you?"

He laughs a little, but it's the least happy sound Hajime's heard from him in years. "Not a chance, Iwa-chan. If it was anyone else, I'd sooner break my own hands. I'd break every single one of my fingers and laugh about it before ever, ever giving them the chance to do it again."

This is what it must be like to be run through with a knife, thinks Hajime. Oikawa thinks he means this.

Everything recalibrates in Hajime's head. It's not that Oikawa saw Hajime look at him in a certain way and thought that Hajime would be happy to hook up, maybe even tumble into bed together. Oikawa's saying – Oikawa's saying horrible, awful things that Hajime has desperately wanted to hear for so long now. That he wants Hajime *for more*. That this wouldn't happen with anyone else.

And those words may even be coming from a truthful place – but Hajime can't trust it.

That's what it comes down to. Hajime can't trust it. Not when Oikawa – *Oikawa* – so easily flinches at the reminder of what he lost. Something with Oikawa – Hajime can't do it unless it's permanent. But if Hajime responds to this now – if Hajime grabs Oikawa's wrist right now and reels him in, kisses Oikawa before dragging him to the nearest hotel or hell, the sketchiest airbnb in their neighbourhood to devour the rest of him – and then three weeks, three months, three years later Oikawa realizes this would never have happened if Oikawa hadn't been emotionally vulnerable, if they weren't in this strange, comforting bubble of *back home* where they're falling back into old patterns – if that happens, then Hajime is never going to recover.

Even thinking of the possibility is devastating. Hajime's lungs feel too big for the cage of his ribs, every breath a struggle. Hajime wants this more than anything – has wanted it with the kind of aching desperation that's always on the verge of engulfing him whole – but not like this. He can't have it like this. Not when he can't be sure it's

real.

"I know you think you mean it," says Hajime at last. "But Tooru, you're still working through what happened with Juan." He has to shut his eyes. "You're my best friend. You've been one of the most important people to me since you were *four*. Don't – don't do this."

Silence.

When Hajime gets the strength to look at him again–

Oikawa looks like he's just been hit. Or that – or that he heard the worst news of his life. His eyes are wide and there's something pale underneath his sun browned skin. He's staring at Hajime the way Hajime would expect him to stare at a ghost.

And then he takes a sharp step back.

"I'm sorry," says Oikawa, as though those two words from him – directed toward Hajime – isn't a sign of the end times. He puts another step in between them. "I shouldn't have done that. I didn't understand that it was – that was wrong of me. Fuck."

"What?" Everything about what Oikawa said sits uncomfortably in Hajime, even though he's, in substance, repeating back what Hajime just said. Something about the *way* he says it– "Hey, it's fine. It's – it's you and me. It's always gonna be fine between us, all right?"

"Right."

Oikawa drags his hand over his face. Worry pools in Hajime's gut. This isn't like him. Oikawa shouldn't – he doesn't show his – his – his whatever this is – Oikawa never shows it like this.

"It's going to be fine," Oikawa repeats. He looks tired.

"Tooru–" Hajime starts, but Oikawa shakes his head.

"I'm going to go, Iwa-chan. You know Dad's going to make me drive first, and I have to be awake to navigate on the wrong side of the road."

"Yeah." Even that single word feels too heavy in his mouth. "Yeah – of course."

There's nothing else to it. Oikawa just says, "I'll see you when I get back," and starts to walk. There's still a few minutes of a common path left on their way home, but that doesn't matter: despite what Oikawa said about needing to have an early night, he sets off down a different street.

It's fine. He tells himself the same reassurance he'd provided Oikawa earlier. It's going to be fine. Oikawa is hurting. Oikawa admitted it himself, in no uncertain terms. He's just weeks out of a stable, caring, long-term relationship with someone he wanted to build a life with. He's not a machine that can just delete the spaces left from those intricate ties. It made sense he'd want to fill them. It even made sense that his need landed on Hajime.

If this had happened – if it just happened *later*, if Oikawa wasn't still so raw, if Hajime could believe this was born of anything other than an ongoing heartbreak – Hajime would already have packed up and moved to Argentina to make this work.

All the possibilities form and dissipate within seconds. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter. It happened tonight, and there was no way Hajime could've said yes.

And somehow, the worst part of all: the realization that if Oikawa had somehow found it in him to reach out to Hajime twice – it's not going to happen a third time. It doesn't matter if this second chance is one Oikawa wouldn't have considered if he'd been thinking straight. The loss of this potential – already thought to be impossible, only made real because of the worst combination of circumstances – the loss of it slams into him. Not a sting, nothing as inconsequential as that, but more a – a kick to his chest. A baseball bat to his stomach.

The horrific truth of it settles in Hajime.

This is never going to happen again. There's no question about it.

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When Hajime's twenty-three, what happens is this:

It's late December. Hajime's in his final year of grad school. His last exam for the semester is in less than a week, and his flight to Japan to celebrate New Year's with his family is just a few days after that.

This time of the year still doesn't sit right with Hajime without the snow and the bitter cold, the shortened hours of sunlight. Going more than a few months without seeing his parents doesn't either. Oikawa calls it "Iwa-chan's perfect only child syndrome," which is the kind of statement that necessitates an ass kicking even if it's the whole truth. Hajime's close with his mom and dad, but they're not like the Oikawas who have the desire and ability to spend an entire month out of the year in a foreign country. They'd do it, of course, but they wouldn't *enjoy* it. Hajime's parents like the comfort of home and their everyday life, and Hajime's not going to ask them to take on the harrowing flight when he's more than capable of doing it himself.

He doesn't often feel homesick, but it always hits him unexpectedly in the days leading up to his flight. Most of his international friends go through the same thing. Some part of Priya's thesis actually has to do with this from an evolutionary perspective: home and filial bonds and how it's all part of the biological imperative.

All this is to say that when he sees *Mom* flashing on his phone screen at eleven that evening, Hajime's terribly happy to see it.

"Hey," he says, kicking his wheely chair away from his study desk. "How're you?"

"Hajime," chokes Mom, and in that single second Hajime's entire body goes cold. Mom sounds like she's been crying – her breathing is uneven and her voice is thick, her words breaking in between syllables. "I'm – I'm all right, sweetheart. How are you? Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Mom, what's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing," says Mom, which is such a blatant lie that for a second Hajime just gapes at the wall in front of him. "You focus on your exams, okay? I'm sorry if I disturbed you, I'm just – I missed you–"

For a second, Hajime wonders if that really is it. Hajime knows that there were times he'd wanted to call home in tears – but then in the background he hears someone say, muffled, "Auntie, please, you have to–" and even through the warbled static of a two-out-of-five star VOIP – Hajime knows that voice.

"Is that Oikawa?" he demands. "Didn't his flight just get in today? Why's he with you? What's going on?" Without realizing it Hajime's gotten to his feet. "Mom?"

"I–" And here Mom just stops trying and sobs, "Hajime, it's your dad. He's been an accident. And it's not – oh, Hajime. It isn't looking good. He hasn't – he hasn't woken up."

Hajime drops his phone. By the time his now shaking hands are able to scramble for it, Mom's cries have gotten worse.

"What?" His voice is faint to his own ears. "What? What do you mean?"

There's a shuffling sound on the other end of the call. "Mom?" Hajime sounds hysteric. "Mom, where'd you go?"

"Iwa-chan." Oikawa's quiet voice surprises Hajime so much that he freezes. For a moment he even stops breathing, which is only how he realizes how harshly he *had* been breathing. "Iwa-chan, Auntie is – she's upset. I'm here with her. And my parents will come after work. We'll take care of anything she needs, okay?"

"Tooru," Hajime whispers, hoarse. "What happened to Dad?"

Oikawa sounds heavy with exhaustion, but his words are steady as he explains: two and a half days ago, a car slipped on black ice in their neighbourhood and rammed right into Dad as he was walking home after work. There were plenty of witnesses but no one else was hurt. Uncle Oikawa had been one of the many neighbours who had gone outside to investigate. The ambulance and paramedics arrived quickly and Uncle had gone with Mom to the hospital. Dad's entire right side took a hell of a beating, and he had to go straight into surgery. That took the entire night. Things were a little touch-and-go during the procedure but post-op results seemed promising. The swelling in his brain had gone down.

Except that he started crashing again a couple hours ago and had to be rushed back into an operating room. He's there right now.

Hajime hears the sequence of events and can't make sense of any of it.

Dad's under a knife right now on the other side of the ocean. For the second time in two days. Two days, because that's when all this started: two and a half days ago.

Two and a half days ago, and Hajime's only finding out about this now. Why didn't anyone tell him? He's going to throw up. What had Hajime been doing two and a half days ago? His mind supplies the answer almost instantly: he'd just finished his anatomy exam. He'd borrowed David's car after to drive up to Tustin Heights because Hanamaki had texted him a laundry list of Trader Joe's shit he wanted and the one beside campus could only be relied on to never have chocolate covered peanut butter cups. *That's* what Hajime had been doing while his dad – *Dad* – had been – while he'd been–

"Don't be mad at Auntie," says Oikawa, tired. "She didn't – you're in the middle of finals, she didn't want to–"

Hajime physically can't think about that right now without punching a wall. He says, "I'm getting on a plane tonight."

Somehow, just making the decision makes the hazy fog of shock and horror and – and that's guilt, isn't it – all of it lifts enough for his synapses to start firing, for his limbs to start moving. Hajime can

think again. And the main thought burning in his mind is: get back home. Fuck his exams and his bank account. Hajime needs to get back home right *now*.

There's a brief moment of silence from Oikawa. Hajime has only gone so far as opening his browser when Oikawa says, "There's a flight to Narita leaving LAX at 3:15am and there're some seats still left. Japan Airlines. Don't get the earlier one – even if you make it in time, you'll still have to wait for the connection to Sendai. Can David drive you?"

David's a questionable roommate at best, but an astronomically reliable friend. His face goes ashen when Hajime tells him what happened. "Jesus," he says. "Of course I'll take you," and with that confirmation Hajime goes through the motions. Oikawa calls back from his own phone and keeps him company the entire time, demanding that Hajime tell him what he's doing. He throws only the most necessary things into his backpack: passport, laptop, charger. His phone's already in his hand. Wallet and keys go in his pocket. Oikawa tells him to throw in a hoodie, his earphones, his portable battery, the data-only SIM he uses when he's back in Japan.

"And for the love of all that's good in the world – put on running shoes, not those horrible sandals. They'll give you frostbite on the plane," says Oikawa, and the words are dispensed with such derision in his voice that on any other day Hajime would've smiled.

He's out the door a little after midnight, but it still takes them more than an hour to make it to LAX because of the construction on the I-105. Still, it's enough. Even through the drive Oikawa stays on the call. Hajime hears him murmur Hajime's progress to Mom and how he deliberately *doesn't* pass on Mom's urgent and tearful, "What? No, no – you have to stop him, he shouldn't be coming – this was a mistake—" back to Hajime.

Hajime hears him curse and say, "Hold on – let me put you on speaker – the doctor's out," just before their exit. He hears Oikawa's relieved sigh, hears Mom breaking into tears again the moment the unfamiliar voice says, "We managed to close the bleed, he's in stable condition. We'll keep monitoring him but – he should be in the clear."

Hajime doesn't feel any relief. He won't, not until he sees Dad in

person. Right before he has to go through security and run for the gate, Oikawa says, "I'll see you tomorrow, Iwa-chan. I'll update your mom on everything, okay?"

"Okay," says Hajime roughly. Then, "Tooru, you – you'll stay with them, right? You'll tell me if something happens?"

"What kind of stupid questions are these," is Oikawa's reply, and a tiny, tiny sliver of the tension eases from inside Hajime right before he starts the worst trip of his life.

He should be in the clear, the doctor had said, and if that changes, if anything happens while Hajime's two and a half days behind and thirty-six thousand feet in the air without a WiFi connection–

No.

Hajime squeezes his eyes shut.

No, he reminds himself. Not now.

Fifteen hours and a connection through Narita later, Hajime spots Oikawa waiting at arrivals at Sendai International. Oikawa looks like shit – his eyes puffy under his glasses, skin pale, hair the kind of mess he'd normally rather die than be caught in public with. Hajime hasn't seen him look like this since he caught the flu back in their second year of high school and had stubbornly dragged himself to practice. But he's standing straight and his gaze is alert, and his whole face softens when he sees Hajime. Oikawa lifts an arm to wave at him.

His free arm. The other one is occupied by a bulky winter jacket that Hajime recognizes as his own. It's the one Mom had with her last December when she'd been in this very same waiting area so that he could put it on before leaving the airport. Oikawa must have gone to Hajime's parents' house and got it.

Those hot pinpricks are back behind his eyes. Hajime has to give himself his reminder again: not now. Not even when Oikawa pulls him into a brief but crushing hug, not when Oikawa says, "Iwa-chan, put this on and let's go," before driving him straight to the hospital.

It isn't until Hajime sees Dad unconscious in bed, and hears Mom say,

"Hajime," in that awful, broken voice, that Hajime lets go of the white-knuckled grip on his fear and grief. It engulfs everything, from his bone deep exhaustion to the strange, angry betrayal he's been pushing down every time he thinks about how Mom waited so long to tell him.

He gathers Mom in his arms. This time, he doesn't give himself any reminders.

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Oikawa's lingering jet lag, obsessive personality, and track record of being exactly what Hajime needs when Hajime's at his absolute lowest means that during the hours Hajime had been flying, he'd been shamelessly contacting Hajime's friends back in Irvine, piecing together Hajime's exam schedule, and drafting emails for Hajime's professors and the registrar's office in the worst English Hajime's seen in years – clearly typed in Japanese and then deposited in Google translate. Oikawa's face goes from pleased to offended when he sees the extent of edits Hajime makes right in front of him.

"You tried, I guess," says Hajime.

"You're a jackass, I guess," says Oikawa in response, sticking out his tongue.

But Oikawa doesn't stop trying. None of his family does, even though Hajime being here means that he and Mom can take turns being with Dad – especially after Mom has to go back to work after taking off so many days without notice. Hajime takes over handling questions around Dad's insurance. He's there with Uncle Oikawa when the police have follow-up questions on their ongoing file. Oikawa has even less experience with the health and legal system than Hajime does, but he's made himself the third semi-permanent presence in

Dad's hospital room. He's usually there with Hajime, though he makes himself scarce whenever Mom's around.

After dinner one of those nights when the Oikawas feed him again – and saddles him with a generous bento to take back to the hospital for Mom before they switch places and Mom comes home for the night – Hajime turns to Auntie Oikawa and lowers his head in a bow.

There's no one left in Mom's family and most of Dad's side is in Kyushu. They won't be able to make it to Miyagi for at least another week, though his cousin Shigeru has been instrumental in helping navigate dealings with the lawyers. It's no one's fault, Hajime knows – it's just what happens. But Hajime's viscerally aware that everything could have been so much worse. Their support network of Iwaizumis may not be nearby, but that doesn't mean they're alone up in Miyagi.

He's lucky. Hajime's so damn lucky. If he's used up all his good fortune in meeting Oikawa when they were little knobbly-kneed monsters and there are no more breaks coming Hajime's way for the rest of his life – then Hajime still got the better end of the deal from the universe.

"You're doing so much," he says, gaze trained on the ground. His voice is thick. "We're in your debt."

But Auntie just pats his shoulder and says, "Oh, Hajime-kun, none of that now. You're in our care, not our debt. How many years have you looked after Tooru? It's just what you do when you're family."

-

Six days after Hajime arrives in Sendai, Dad wakes up. The tests that the doctors perform suggest the best possible outcome: Dad won't be

able to go home for a while yet, and once the cast on his leg comes off there's still months of physio waiting for him – but there aren't any indicators of long-term impairment in his brain. His mind is intact. His personality, his memories – those precious and irreplaceable things are intact.

That night is the first time Hajime heads home at the same time as Mom. Dad had looked horrified on hearing the schedule his son and his wife have been keeping for the last week and promptly kicked them out with strict instructions not to come back until tomorrow morning after breakfast. At the *earliest*.

The two of them duck into their favourite sukiyaki place to pick up dinner on the way back. Normally they'd have sat down but there's no possibility of them finding an open seat with it being Christmas Eve. Hajime takes in all the couples sitting together through the fog of exhaustion and lingering elation. Over the last few days, he hasn't given a single thought to the outside world. It's unsettling, knowing that everyone else carried on as usual while he'd been so disconnected. Those days that passed in a haze – they won't come back.

When they finally settle to eat at home with a quietly murmured, *itadakimasu*, Mom says, "Your flight was supposed to come in this morning."

December 24. That's right. "Huh," says Hajime. "Yeah, it was."

"Hajime." There's a tightness in the corner of her eyes as she looks at him. Her long, frail fingers are gripping her chopsticks far too hard. "You dropped everything to get here."

Hajime carefully places his own chopsticks beside his bowl.

So they're doing this now, then. "Everything for me isn't a whole lot."

It's the truth. Hajime hadn't had any commitments or responsibilities except for his exams. Utsui-san always gives the last month of the semester off to his interns for finals but even if he hadn't – Hajime would have made the same call. These things are important – of course they are – but not more important than this. Even if Hajime's

request for deferring his last two exams into the next semester hadn't been accepted, even if he had to make those up in a kiler of a next semester or hell, extend his timeline and of finishing his degree altogether – it wouldn't have changed his decision.

Dad's fine, now. Mostly fine. All right, he's not fine at all but he *will* be, but until today there was no guarantee of that. And if things had gone south and Mom had been here by herself when they told her that Dad–

No. Absolutely not.

Mom looks like she disagrees. But before she can say so, the question that's been clawing at his throat for the past week, suppressed under a constant litany of, *not now not now it's not important* finally comes to the surface: "Mom, why'd you wait?" Mom flinches at the question. Hajime tries to keep his voice steady but doesn't quite manage it. "Why did you wait so long to call me?"

For a few awful seconds, Mom doesn't say anything. Then, softly– "I didn't want you to worry."

That doesn't make any sense. "What?"

"You're in school, Hajime. It was during exams. I knew that the news would – make you act rashly. Or at the very least, it would split your concentration and put your head in two different places. And in this part of your life – Hajime, I know you know this. It's so important to be focused on your future right now. Falling behind at this point, right when you're about to start your career – it'll make everything that much harder for all the years to come. The world's not going to be kind or understanding for your reasons–"

Something is starting to kindle inside of him, hot and ugly.

"I kept telling myself, it isn't worth disrupting Hajime's life," confesses Mom. "Not yet, not when things – not when things could still be okay. What if I called you and ruined everything and it turned out Dad was fine two days later?"

The tenuous rein Hajime had on his temper explodes.

"That doesn't matter!" he yells. He barely even realizes he's doing it. Iwaizumi Hajime is a lot of things, but he isn't someone who shouts at his mom. But right now, *right now*– "Don't you think I deserve to know? That I deserve to know what's happening with my family–"

"Of course you do–"

"You guys are more important to me than school and work! How can you – how can you expect me to leave you and Dad again when you're going to hide these–" And just like that, the fury coursing through him is abruptly doused as a horrible thought occurs to him. Something that stupidly never occurred to him before. "You weren't going to tell me at all, were you?"

Mom is looking down at her hands. "Not until you were done with your semester."

It'd hurt less if she had slapped him.

Hajime doesn't know how to reply. He tries to imagine it: would he have been able to tell Mom was being secretive? Hajime calls them at least once a week. Would Mom have told him before he left Irvine? Or would she have just waited until he'd arrived home and wondered why she looked like she aged ten years in the few months Hajime's been away. Would she have said, "I didn't want you to worry on your flight"?

Would Hajime ever have forgiven her for keeping this from him? Would he have forgiven himself for not being there for her?

When she finally turns her gaze to Hajime, her already gaunt face gets worse. "Hajime, please say something."

There's nothing Hajime can say. Nothing, except– "Then why'd you do it?"

Because that's the only thing that's a mystery. If Mom hadn't wanted him to know, it didn't make sense that she'd call him when she was so vulnerable.

"You said you weren't going to tell me," repeats Hajime. "Then why did you?"

"Oh." Mom looks surprised at the question. It eases the lines of tension and worry from her. "Oh. It was – well, it was Tooru-kun."

Hajime blinks. "What?"

"Tooru-kun," she repeats. "Hiro-san and Midori-san told him about Dad when he arrived. He came to see me that morning and – and I suppose he hadn't realized you didn't know. He convinced me to tell you. The way he laid it out – he didn't leave any room for arguments."

Hajime knows both his mom and Oikawa well enough to read between the lines. What Mom means is that Oikawa was – pressuring her. Manipulating her, somehow, the way he's capable of doing everywhere but mostly leaves to the court. Hajime doesn't know what he's feeling. Faintly, he asks, "What did he say to you?"

Mom closes her eyes.

"That you wouldn't forgive yourself if you didn't know," she says quietly, and Hajime's breath gets knocked out of his chest. "He said that even if your dad woke up the very next day and everything was fine, you'd always remember I kept this from you and it would – it might change your mind about staying abroad to work with Utsui-san after graduating. If – if you thought you couldn't trust us to let you know the important things. He said no matter what you did after you found out, even if it made things harder in the long run – you'd rather do that than keep going with... how'd he say it? In ignorance. That you wouldn't think it was me looking out for you, you'd think that I didn't respect you. And that it would be easy for him to just call you himself and tell you but – but that would make it worse. He thought that it should come from me."

Here, Mom laughs a little. It isn't happy, exactly, but it isn't – it isn't upset or bitter. It's the kind of laughter that happens when you don't know what else to do when faced with something unprecedented.

"Anyone else, I'd have told them it wasn't their business. That they were overstepping. But it wasn't just anyone. It was Tooru-kun." Mom shakes her head. "There's no one else who'd know you well enough – that I'd *trust* knew you well enough – to make these claims. There's

no polite way to tell me that if I was worried about my son's future, then not saying anything was the worst thing I could do for him. No one would have the nerve. Threatening to call you if I didn't, right there outside your dad's room, with him still unconscious."

And Hajime-

Hajime is-

Hajime is stunned silent.

Never in his life has Hajime felt so – so raw, naked, stripped bare of all protection. His face is burning. His heart is hammering. He needs to – to walk into the ocean, or become a recluse in a cave, or just disappear off the face of the Earth because there's absolutely nothing, nothing that can make him not know this frightening truth:

Oikawa knows him.

Oikawa *knows* him.

Oikawa knows things about him that no one else does. Things that a human being simply isn't supposed to know about another. Things that are part of Hajime's blueprint. The secrets of how he works. It's not just things that can be understood about someone from prolonged proximity, from being best friends – but surely those must be

prerequisites as well. These are things that Hajime's never breathed a word of, things Hajime hoards close and keeps buried because they're too important and precious to let the world have. They are the keys to unlocking him, understanding him, dismantling him.

Oikawa knows these things because he's Oikawa, and when he *looks* he *sees* and Oikawa had decided Hajime was worth looking at and figuring out. If Hajime's ever had a halfway effective armour, it's nothing Oikawa can't rip apart. That Oikawa already *has* ripped apart.

Oikawa had seen the soft, bloody parts of Hajime and he spilled what he saw to Mom, used it to drag Hajime across the ocean because he knew that's what Hajime needed. He knew the consequences Hajime could live with and the consequences he couldn't. What Hajime could forgive and what he couldn't. The possibility of ruining the easy relationship Oikawa always had with Hajime's mom was factored in. The possibility of Hajime finding out and planting his fist across Oikawa's jaw for putting Hajime's mom through this – for making her cry – was factored in.

Oikawa did the math and decided it was worth it. *Don't be mad at Auntie*, he'd told Hajime.

"He," starts Hajime, struggling to keep his voice even, "he said all that?"

"Yes. And you know, Hajime, in all the years we've known him – before that day, I don't think I've ever been angry at Tooru-kun. You know that I've never been anything but terribly fond of him. But before that day – I don't think I've ever been angry at anyone for daring to make sense, either."

Mom sounds a little wry and a little sad as she says, "He was right, wasn't he?"

Hajime presses the heels of his palms against his eyes. He can't answer her. He can't.

Fuck, he thinks. Fuck.

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If that day in late summer when Oikawa had said, *it's you. I like you, Iwa-chan*, is one of two moments Hajime keeps circling back to, then the second one is this:

The next time he sees Oikawa is later that evening. It's a bad idea. Hajime feels as though a bomb's gone off inside of him and there's nothing left to be salvaged. His limbs feel insubstantial, light. He can't think straight.

All he can think about is Oikawa. Round-faced and pink cheeked and maybe four, five years old, gleefully shrieking, "Iwa-chan's too slow to catch me!" as his little legs try to carry him out of Hajime's reach. Oikawa, a little bit older, starry-eyed over Jose Blanco and screaming just as loudly as Hajime at the TV screen and their combined voices are aggravating enough to have Hiromi nee-san playfully growl and chase them around the house with increasingly silly threats. Oikawa, a few years later, passed out on Hajime's bed and drooling on his pillow – so practiced at being charming but never quite able to manage it around Hajime. Oikawa, who no matter their bickering and fighting, has always been the first person Hajime will choose to be near, to spend his time with.

That moment, how Oikawa had looked in the dreamy, golden sunset as he said, "You don't have to say anything else, Iwa-chan."

Years and years of having the privilege of hitting Oikawa's ever perfecting sets. Years and years of knowing that his job was to lift Oikawa up, the way Oikawa has always lifted him up with his unconditional trust, the most fundamental part of being a team. All those shared wins and losses. How straight Oikawa's shoulders had been as he bowed to Seijoh after their final defeat. How Oikawa

hadn't shed a single tear after the match but he did when he had to say goodbye. There had been no chance of Hajime keeping it together after that, knowing that it was the end of this particular chapter for the two of them.

The next winter back in Sendai, when he'd thrown at least fourteen snowballs to the back of Hajime's head. Flying up to Irvine to help Hajime settle when he first moved there a year and a half ago. The way he'd been smiling, cautiously delighted, when Hajime had met Juan back in the summer. How relieved Hajime had been when he realized Juan had understood the fortune he'd stumbled into in Oikawa, that Oikawa would be in good hands. Oikawa, Hajime's oldest and dearest and best of friends. The friend who'd strong-armed Mom into calling him. Who remembered to bring Hajime's jacket to the airport.

It's absolutely unfathomable that it took until tonight for Hajime to follow these string of seamless moments to its inevitable conclusion. To understand just why the sight of Oikawa instantly puts an essential part of Hajime at ease even when the rest of him is gearing for disaster.

Hajime knocks on the door to Oikawa's parents' home.

Moments later, Oikawa answers.

At first he looks startled to see Hajime, and then pleased. The genuine happiness on Oikawa's face somehow translates into a hand squeezing around Hajime's heart. It gets worse when the look slides into something sly. That little spark of mischief in Oikawa's gaze, the one that means he's about to purposely poke and prod and set alight Hajime's temper.

"Twa-chan!" Oikawa's expression transforms into an overdone

grimace. It's a tried and true performance, this script between them. Oikawa wrinkles his nose and complains, "Urgh, when was the last time you took a shower? You've got no more excuses for looking like *that* now that Uncle's getting better."

Then he grins, waiting for Hajime's reaction.

Hajime cannot react. Hajime can only drink him in, the sight of the face that's just the same as it had been yesterday, the face that's been a part of his life and his self for as long as he can remember. Hajime's known that there was no one else like Oikawa for just as long. There's just nothing about him that's imitable. Even now, standing on the doorstep of his parents' house, wearing a knitted sweater over his old pajamas – Oikawa is extraordinary, simply because he is.

And Hajime is in love with him.

"I just—" starts Hajime, but the words vanish from his tongue. He stops, lost. Language is failing him. Everything that Hajime knows is getting drowned out. Right now Hajime is nothing but a maelstrom of *feeling*, and everything he feels is for Oikawa.

Oikawa's smile fades.

"What's wrong?"

"I just wanted to – to say thanks." It's expressing only a fraction of what is in Hajime's heart, but it's perhaps the most important part. "For everything you and – and Uncle and Auntie did for us." Hajime's voice sounds hollow. *Not now*, he tells himself. Not now. "Just – thank you."

For what seems like a stretch of time, Oikawa doesn't say anything. He just stares at Hajime. Hajime stares back.

What do I do with this? he thinks. *What am I supposed to be doing with this?*

"This thing with Uncle really rattled you, huh?" Oikawa finally says. "Me too." He knocks a fist against Hajime's shoulder. It's gentle. The look on Oikawa's face is even gentler. "He'll be okay, Iwa-chan."

"Yeah," croaks Hajime. "Yeah, it'll be okay." The last week is a testament to how shaken Hajime has been about Mom and Dad. Oikawa had been one of the main reasons Hajime had been able to bear it. But Oikawa can't help Hajime bear the weight of this.

Oikawa's always been one of a kind. That has always been true. The only thing that's changed in the last hour is that Hajime now knows that there will never be anyone like him *for Hajime* – no one who will mean to him what Oikawa does, what Oikawa always has.

Hajime now knows that no one's ever even had a chance.

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The unease after Oikawa says goodbye to him stays with Hajime the whole night and follows him into the morning.

There's just something about how Oikawa had said it: *That was wrong of me. I didn't understand.* Just moments ago he had been so vehement that Hajime was wrong in saying he didn't mean it. And while it's not unheard of for Hajime to actually get through to Oikawa with a few unexpectedly well chosen words, the horror on Oikawa's face had been – Hajime's cold even now thinking about it.

And it was horror. It wasn't embarrassment or disappointment or frustration because of their disagreement. Hajime's known Oikawa for a very long time and there's usually a light that dawns in Oikawa's eyes those rare times he tells Hajime, "You have a point there, Iwa-chan." It's a sign that means Oikawa *got it*.

Oikawa hadn't said, "You were right." What Oikawa said was, "That

was wrong of me." It's such a small distinction and yet – and yet Hajime can't let it go. Not when the look on Oikawa's face yesterday was so starkly different from the contemplative one he usually gets when he really does understand what Hajime's trying to say.

Predictably, Hajime barely gets any sleep. He comes down for breakfast and he must look ready to commit murder because Dad takes one look at him and goes, "What's wrong? You look like someone just stole your promotion!"

"My industry isn't really like that," says Hajime.

Dad gives his hand a sympathetic pat. "You really are feeling bad, huh? Couldn't even recognize a figure of speech! Do you want to talk about it?"

Hajime can't imagine anything he wants to talk about less, to anyone. He and Hanamaki are really not so different when it comes down to it. The only real difference is that Hajime will relent to a necessary conversation about feelings while Hanamaki is willing to fake a medical condition to get out of it.

As it is, this is *not* a necessary conversation that Hajime has to have. Especially not with Dad. There's no way to explain how Hajime's feeling without the twenty-two years of context leading up to it.

Having raised Hajime, Dad seems to understand most of this from Hajime's sullen silence. "Ah, well, the offer stands. Try and take a nap, Hajime – it would be such a shame if you lost an entire day of vacation to grouchiness."

The day probably would have gone in that direction if Oikawa hadn't started sending pictures of him and his parents to the group chat in the afternoon. The first one is them at the Golden Pavilion and is received with equal levels of ridicule and envy. Seeing the opportunity for what it is, Hajime's fingers shake only a little as he types, *Next time crop yourself out for maximum aesthetic value.*

Oikawa replies a few minutes later.

[Tooru]

3:27pm: *Oh you mean like the aesthetic value here?*

3:28pm: *[attached: IMG0012]*

It's that terrible selfie of Hajime and Ushijima that Hajime had sent him years ago. Or a version of it. The version that Oikawa had sent back to him marked up with all the ways it was "a disgrace, in general" and "an insult to the art of photography, specifically." The fact that Oikawa still has it – that he probably has it saved in his meme folder for ease of access – is just – it's such a familiar, Shittykawa thing to do that the tension leeches out of Hajime's body when he sees it.

Confirmation of Oikawa acting like his usual self with him is worth the subsequent explosion in the chat, spearheaded by Hanamaki going, *CAPTAIN HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN SITTING ON THIS please tell me you have the originals*. It won't stop Hajime from returning to that night over and over, and it won't stop him from questioning everything that happened, but – but it's something. It might even be the most important part.

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Hajime spends the next few days on the pieces of his life Oikawa's not a part of. He's never quite grown out of seeing himself as Iwaizumi-senpai with Kyoutani and goes to one of the Sendai Frogs' home games, gets dinner with him afterward. His apartment back in Irvine had been sublet during his contract with Team Japan and David's been helping him getting his ducks in a row before he comes back in September. Utsui-san emails him about the clients he'll be taking on. He sends over his paperwork to Susie, who's indispensable for the clinic and serves multiple functions including being their entire HR department.

And, of course, he spends time with his parents in the last two weeks he has left. One of those weeks will have the three of them in Kagoshima with Dad's sisters and their families, most of whom Hajime hasn't seen in over a year. "They're all very proud of you," Dad tells him. "And Nanao-chan's definitely going to grill you about that Miya fellow. She has some very bold passions for a five year-old."

"How did she end up so devoted to that boy and not Tooru-kun?" Mom wants to know. "Did they not show her the Argentina game? Didn't they point out her favourite uncle's favourite friend?"

"Maybe Nanao has some national pride, Mom," Hajime points out.

"Or maybe her parents are failing in a critical aspect of her education," offers Dad. "Tooru-kun might not have a Japanese passport anymore but he's still one of our own!"

"People like you are the reason Oikawa is the way he is," grumbles Hajime, to which Mom laughs and says to Dad, "I think our son is trying to scold us!"

Oikawa comes back from Kyoto two days before his flight to Argentina.

They don't have anything planned in that short time, but Hajime's desperately glad to still have the time to talk to Oikawa and just – just make sure. Hajime can't have what happened cause a strain between them. They've gone through their entire lives together. Their friendship had made it through three different continents, standing on opposite sides of the court. Hajime has existed with this want of Oikawa inside of him and *worked* to make sure he didn't succumb into regret or jealousy or bitterness when the extent of what he'd lost in Oikawa had become clear to him.

Oikawa had kissed him, and Hajime had *pushed him away* for the sake of this relationship that's always been part of the definition of Iwaizumi Hajime. It's been five days and Hajime still can't believe he managed to do it. If twenty-three year old Hajime could see him now he'd sock Hajime right across the face. But the decision Hajime had to make to protect his own heart was the same decision that

protected their friendship before Hajime could ruin it.

He texts Oikawa the day before his flight to see if he's free for Hajime to drop in. Oikawa's in the "middle of packing" but replies back with an affirmative.

"Hajime," Uncle Oikawa greets Hajime at the door. "Have you had lunch? Tooru's just fussing over the last of his packing. He's on his third round of optimally arranging his check-ins." Uncle's tone makes it very clear what he thinks about his son's 'optimally arranging.' "Your auntie and I are praying that it's his last. Please stop him from starting a round four."

"I'll try my best," promises Hajime as he slips out of his shoes. Uncle claps him on the shoulder and sends him upstairs.

Hajime enters Oikawa's room to find that he's too late and Oikawa is already in the process of undoing the progress of round three: he's crouched on the floor and pulling things out of his two open suitcases, muttering, "Why's it such a mess every time?" under his breath.

"You still don't have a strategy for this?" Hajime asks in lieu of a hello and Oikawa lets out a little surprised yelp.

"Twa-chan!" He turns to Hajime, face screwed up in a crabby expression. "Did you come here just to mock me?"

"Always." Oikawa scowls at the answer. He grabs the Pikachu plush he got for Javier's daughter and throws it at Hajime's head. Hajime catches it and stares at its glossy black eyes. "Jeez. Why'd I think this was smaller and more life-sized when you bought it?"

Oikawa sighs and flops down on his back, right there on the floor, and throws an arm over his eyes. "I can't even be bothered to go after you for saying 'life-sized' about a Pikachu."

"You just did, Shittykawa," says Hajime, throwing the toy back and Oikawa lets it hit his face. Hajime gingerly navigates the minefield of Oikawa's luggage and sits down beside him. "Other than... this... whole thing... you're mostly good to go?"

"Guess so," says Oikawa pensively. "It's gonna be harder than usual this time." A second later he makes a face. "Urgh, Iwa-chan, I just remembered what a bad job we did in our Brotherhood rewatch," he whines. "We didn't even make it to Briggs!"

Hajime nudges Oikawa with a socked foot. He's helpless to the affection that blossoms inside of him, pushing against his throat. Too much, Hajime thinks. Too much.

"C'mon. I'll help you finish packing your mountain of presents and we can make it to the Promised Day tonight."

Oikawa lifts his arm to squint at him. "That's twelve episodes. And there's no way we can just *stop* when the Promised Day starts. Don't you remember what happened when I watched it the first time?"

What had happened was that Oikawa stayed up until 5am watching the last twenty episodes in one shot. He showed up to school the next day looking like a zombie with no regrets. Hajime was blackmailed into standing guard during lunch while Oikawa took a nap on the roof, his volleyball uniform folded into a makeshift pillow under his head and Hajime's blazer draped above him as a blanket. It had taken him exactly twelve seconds to pass out.

"Then let's do it," shrugs Hajime. "Thirty-two episodes." That's half the entire series. They really *did* do a shit job at watching this. "Less than twelve hours. We can get it done." They've done worse than this when they were younger.

"We probably could," agrees Oikawa. For a moment he doesn't continue and when Hajime glances down at him, it's to find that his eyes are once again closed. His chest rises and falls with his breaths, slow and deliberate. "But you know my last night tradition here."

Hajime's stomach sinks to his feet, which just – it doesn't make sense. It hadn't even been a serious suggestion. Oikawa's flight leaves tomorrow evening. He has more pressing things to do than spend an inadvisable number of hours watching TV with Hajime, and Hajime even knows what those things are.

"Crying over your baby photos with Uncle and Auntie?"

"It's emotionally cathartic for them," informs Oikawa. "Keeps them sustained until they can see their precious, perfect son again—"

"I thought it was them mourning how such a cute kid grew up to be a psycho," says Hajime and is rewarded with an insulted gasp.

Oikawa finally shuffles into a sitting position so he can give Hajime the dirtiest look he can. "Probably prolonged exposure to *you*," he gripes, and it's such a dumb back-and-forth but it's so normal, so *them*. And it's what Hajime wanted tangible proof of when he texted Oikawa, yes, but now that it's happening – now that it's happening, it puts Hajime on edge.

It reminds Hajime that there had been a reason he couldn't sleep that first night. A reason that some uneasiness lingered even after Oikawa had been his usual self in their group messages. The reason Hajime had come here today. Something that he just couldn't shake off.

Steeling himself, Hajime says, "Oikawa, Thursday night, before you left for Kyoto—"

The change in Oikawa's body language is so sudden and apparent that Hajime's mouth snaps shut. Hajime sees the lines of his shoulders tense, hears the sharp intake of air. The playful disgruntlement on his face vanishes. It's replaced with that exquisitely manufactured Oikawa Tooru smile.

"Oh, that," he says breezily as he gets to his feet. "What about it?"

"Uh." Hajime feels like an idiot for even saying it when Oikawa's reaction just gave him the answer, but still he goes, "I just – I just wanted to make sure we're okay."

Oikawa starts puttering around the room and gathering a seemingly random assortment of presents which he drops into one of the suitcases – a build-your-own Gundam set, a navy blue haori cut in a modern style, an assortment of cute stationery.

"Of course we are. Didn't you say it yourself? We'll always be all right."

"You're lying," says Hajime, disbelieving – not because Oikawa's

never been dishonest with him before, not even that Oikawa's never been dishonest with him before in this way, so flippant and casual in tone even as certain tells in his body give him away – but it's never.

He's never been dishonest about *them*.

"I'm lying," repeats Oikawa slowly. The smile vanishes from his face. "Why would I be doing that, Iwa-chan? What exactly am I lying about?"

"I don't know," admits Hajime because he doesn't, he doesn't know what it is exactly. But what he does know is *Oikawa* and Hajime would bet his life on the call that right now, Oikawa is lying to him.

Hajime stands up, takes a step closer to him. "I don't know why, or what it is, but you are. Oikawa, before you left–"

"Why're you bringing that up?" interrupts Oikawa. "That's behind us. You were right. I wasn't thinking straight. I shouldn't have done that. I'm obviously still not over Juan, and I turned to Iwa-chan as a safe, convenient option because I'm just that kind of asshole. I backed off when all this was made very clear to me. It was embarrassing for everyone involved."

Oikawa lists these off almost dismissively. It's a highlight reel of that awful conversation, but distorted. Each sentence sits heavy with *wrongness* in Hajime's gut.

"We both agree on all that," says Oikawa. "We agreed on all this before I left. So why are you bringing this up again?"

"You weren't – you weren't being an asshole," says Hajime, which may not be the most important piece of what Oikawa's saying but it's the only one he can immediately argue with. "I never–"

"Fine," Oikawa interrupts him again. "I wasn't. Everything else is still true. I'm asking you again: why'd you bring this up?"

"I told you," says Hajime. "I wanted to make sure we're okay–"

"And I told you we are. Or at least, as far as I'm concerned we are." Oikawa narrows his eyes at him. "Is there a reason *you* think we're

not?"

"Yeah, the fact that you're full of shit," says Hajime, temper flaring. "I know what you look like when you're lying—"

"Oh, you know me so well, do you?" says Oikawa, and Hajime demands, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" because the way Oikawa said it – it had been a *taunt*. As though it's a joke that Hajime would know the tells of the person he's loved and learned and looked after for as long as he can remember.

Oikawa said it almost bitterly.

"Figure it out," is the response Hajime receives, which is just – just so infuriating. Oikawa turns away from Hajime and starts around the room again, aggressively throwing things into his open suitcase. "Iwa-chan – you need to leave."

"No," says Hajime. "Oikawa, you gotta – you gotta meet me halfway here, give me something—"

"You want me to *give you something*?"

Oikawa stops what he's doing and turns so he's facing Hajime. His eyes are bright with anger. He really is stunning. Even with everything happening right now, Hajime can't *not* notice it. He's staring Hajime down the way he stares down his opponents across the court when he has something to prove. When it's no longer simply his inherent drive to win, but matched with the desire to see the other team lose because they pissed him off in a specific way.

"Iwaizumi Hajime," starts Oikawa, and Hajime barely manages to stop himself from wincing. Oikawa's at the edge of his patience if he's dropping *Iwa-chan*, but at least it hasn't degenerated to just *Iwaizumi*. "You know, you're making me pretty annoyed" His face makes that very clear. "In your expert opinion, am I telling the truth there?"

"You're being a dick," glowers Hajime, because that's also the truth.

"Tough luck," is Oikawa's gritted response. "You need to go. If you really came here to make sure things are okay between us – then you staying here for a second longer is going to do the opposite of that."

"What?" How'd they get to this? "What? Why?"

Oikawa looks at him like he thinks Hajime's lost it.

"Because you're coming in here and talking about something that's over and done with! And you're calling me a liar when I tell you what I think!" It's the first time Oikawa's raised his voice. "So listen here because I'm not going to say this again: I made a bad call that day. I didn't understand what I was doing. I got my head together that night, and it made even more sense while I was away and wasn't in this – this bubble with just the two of us. You were right. I wouldn't have done it if I was thinking straight."

Oikawa says each sentence with fiercely burning conviction. Hajime doesn't often feel intimidated by Oikawa but right now – right now it's clear that Oikawa's on a warpath and the intensity radiating from him overwhelms any possible response Hajime could say. He doesn't think he's ever heard *you were right* sound so much like defeat.

It shouldn't. It shouldn't feel like a complete and total conquest.

After all, it's exactly what Hajime wanted the truth to be. No – he wanted the truth to be what Oikawa had been saying that day, but there was never a way for it to be. Not when it happened when it did, the way it did. Oikawa even voiced Hajime's fear without Hajime ever needing to say it: *it made sense when I wasn't in this bubble with you*.

Of course Oikawa was feeling some sort of way about Hajime when they were spending every day with each other, with each other's families while Oikawa was still reeling from the loss of the person who he thought he'd actually be spending his days with, the person whose family Oikawa one day saw himself joining. The circumstances aligned to make it so. With the help of time and distance and common sense, Oikawa realized he had acted stupidly. This was a bullet dodged for them both.

This is the best outcome. This is what Hajime wanted. This is better than where he thought they were at after their last conversation.

There's absolutely no reason for him to be feeling like his chest is

caving in. Like his heart is breaking.

"I don't care if you believe me or not," Oikawa continues, unaware of how every word is a landed hit on Hajime. "I was perfectly happy never talking about this again and you – if there's a reason you and me aren't okay, it's because you're the one with the problem." Oikawa's eyes flicker critically over Hajime's face. "Is that what this is? I fucked up, and you can't get over it?"

"No," says Hajime because that's not – that's not it. That isn't what Oikawa should be thinking. "You didn't fuck up. There's nothing – there's nothing for me to get over." Except as he says it, he realizes the last part isn't true. Hajime does have something to get over, doesn't he? It's not what Oikawa's thinking, but – but there is something. Something he needs to move past and put behind him.

"Then we're done with this," says Oikawa. "There's nothing more to–"

"Tooru."

Uncle's voice cuts through the stifling tension that had been choking the breath out of Hajime. Almost in unison, Hajime and Oikawa turn to look at him standing at the door to Oikawa's room. He's glancing back and forth between the two of them, frowning.

"I heard shouting," he says carefully. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," replies Oikawa at once. "Yeah, everything's fine, Dad. Iwa-chan was just leaving. Isn't that right, Iwa-chan?"

There are knives coming out of Oikawa's eyes when he turns back to look at Hajime. If Hajime's an expert at knowing when Oikawa's lying, he's also one in knowing when Oikawa's saying, *don't you dare push me right now, not in front of my dad.*

"Yeah," says Hajime, and hates how the rigid lines of Oikawa's posture relaxes at that single word of confirmation. "Sorry if we bothered you, Uncle. I'll – I'll see myself out." He hesitates. He can't just leave things like this. "Oikawa, I'll text you later, okay?"

"Fine," says Oikawa. "I'll see you later."

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For hours, Hajime thinks about what he wants to say to Oikawa. Finally, after dinner, he settles on: *Sorry I was a jackass. If you say we're okay, I believe you.*

He doesn't say, *You were right, I'm the one who has something to get over*, because there's no way to say it without Oikawa coming to all the wrong conclusions. The idea that he would come to the right conclusion is even more horrifying.

What Hajime needs to do is get over this. Ideally he needs to let go of his non-friendly feelings towards Oikawa. But Hajime's pragmatic and knows that that's going to be a lifelong process toward success, if he ever manages it at all. The more immediate action has to do with the – the whatever it is that surfaced when Oikawa had said, *I kissed you because I meant it*, the same instant Hajime realized that Oikawa simply *couldn't*. Hajime needs to get that under control.

Hajime doesn't know how, but he has to figure it out. It's worse than the shock and wonder and the subsequent loss he'd felt when he'd first realized what Oikawa meant to him. The loss is amplified. This time, it feels more like grief. As though Hajime actually had Oikawa and lost him.

Hajime needs to get over this. And he finally understands what *this* is – a completely irrational hope, a what-if, that just isn't extinguishing no matter how much logic he throws at it. What happened last week – that wasn't a real possibility. The only real possibility for them had been when they were younger. Before Oikawa moved on and found something wonderful, before Hajime understood what it was that he felt. Hajime needs to remember that this isn't anything new. All that had happened was Oikawa said things that Hajime never thought he

would and that had unraveled everything Hajime's kept subdued for years. But it had been a mistake on Oikawa's part. Hajime had seen it right away but it hadn't taken Oikawa long to confirm it: *we agreed on all this before I left.*

It takes Oikawa until the morning to reply back. *Okay.*

Hajime, still in bed, feels a headache settling in.

He'd expected to spend his vacation running after Oikawa, but not – not like this. For a moment Hajime doubts that Oikawa would want him to show up to his house to see him off.

But Hajime can't stop himself. No matter what things are like between them, Hajime's going to go say goodbye to his best friend. He's going to go with a package of milk breads his Mom shoves in his hands to give to Oikawa.

Oikawa looks surprised, then tense, to see Hajime at the door. But almost immediately all if it sweeps away to settle into something softer.

"Is that for me?" he says, nodding to the milk breads Hajime is holding.

"No," says Hajime. It's an automatic response, frank and decisive. It's enough to have Oikawa make a show of rolling his eyes before snatching the package from Hajime's hands and moving to sit on the front steps.

"Well, it's mine now," he says, tearing into it. With a full mouth, he adds, "Gotta keep those reflexes sharp, Iwa-chan."

Hajime carefully sits down beside him and deftly steals a piece from Oikawa. Oikawa squawks in protest. Hajime hates this stuff, but it's definitely worth it to keep Oikawa on his toes.

Huffing, Oikawa says, "Whatever."

"Oikawa." Hajime's palms feel hot, sweaty. He wipes them on his jeans. "I wanted to—"

"—make sure we were okay," finishes Oikawa. "Yeah, yeah. I get it. We're good, Iwa-chan." He sighs a little, but sounds like he means it. It really is Hajime with the problem. Nudging Hajime's ribs with a bony elbow, Oikawa adds, "It's been a while since we've had a proper fight, huh? Most of the time it's just you bullying poor Tooru-chan."

"You mean bullying Shittykawa, the only goblin whose existence is acknowledged by the scientific community," says Hajime. "It's my duty as a representative of the human race."

"But you're not a representative of the human race," says Oikawa, sympathetic. "Did you forget your unevolved primate brothers and sisters so quickly?" and surely that deserves a shove, but Hajime settles on stealing another piece of the disgusting milk bread which is objectively better revenge.

The half an hour they spend together sitting on the front steps of Oikawa's parents' house is – it's perfect. It's a clear, bright day, and Oikawa looks particularly phenomenal in the light of the afternoon sun. Not that this means anything coming from Hajime. Oikawa talks shit about the teams in his division he'll be facing the most once the Argentine league starts up again, and Hajime soaks it in amidst the sounds of the occasional bursts of traffic and families going on a walk in their quiet suburban neighbourhood.

All the unease and unsaid things within Hajime quiets. They don't disappear, but they can't hold a candle against the reality that Oikawa is sitting beside him right now when in just a few hours he'll be thousands of miles away. Oikawa had said yesterday that it'll be harder to leave this time, and it's the same for Hajime. It's always agonizing leaving his family even when he has another little family of his friends waiting for him on the other side of the ocean. But this time, after the last few months in Tokyo and the past week and a half with Oikawa – it's going to be awful.

Hajime will get back into the swing of things, of course. He'll get busy with treating his clients, with driving down to LA for Lakers' games with David and Priya, with making the trip to H Mart and grumpily shelling out the premium for furikake and yuzukosho when he inevitably runs out of the packets Mom forced into his luggage. He'll get used to the video calls with Oikawa, to counting down the

minutes for when the hours of being awake in his timezone overlaps with his parents.

It'll be fine. He knows it'll be fine.

But until then – it's going to be awful.

"Hey," says Oikawa. He looks at Hajime with that intent, focused gaze of his. Hajime's heart is engineered to go haywire whenever he notices it directed toward him. "Thanks for coming to see me off."

The, *I wasn't sure you would*, hangs all too heavily between them. "Of course I did."

"Of course," repeats Oikawa quietly. Then, "I'm gonna miss you, Iwa-chan."

Something about Oikawa's tone has Hajime's eyes instantly go hot. They've done these goodbyes so many times before, from right here in Sendai to the departure terminal in San Juan to Hajime's apartment in Irvine where an Uber's waiting to take Oikawa to the LAX shuttle. Countless times and somehow–

It never felt like this before. Not even that first time when Oikawa had packed up his life in Japan and hugged him goodbye before threatening to jump-serve a volleyball into Hajime's face if he didn't pick up Oikawa's calls.

"You too," croaks Hajime. He has to clear his throat before continuing. "I'll see you in a couple months though, yeah? Pit stop on the way to Boston?"

For a second Hajime wants to add, *maybe I can come with you*, which is just – that's just insane. That's not what they are. Hajime remembers that this exact situation is what they were talking about before Oikawa had kissed him a week ago: how this would be the first winter they wouldn't have their own little reunion, and how it was an inevitable change they'd somehow managed to delay for almost a decade.

"Yeah," says Oikawa. "Yeah, you will."

Hajime hears it for the promise it is. It's enough, he thinks. It's enough.

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The day after Oikawa leaves, Hajime and his parents head to Kagoshima.

It's the last thing before Hajime will leave Japan. They used to visit at least once a year when Hajime had been younger. It was usually in August for one to two weeks, during the peak of summer break because all five of Hajime's cousins grew up in the south. Nowadays they're a bit more scattered: Kyou ended up going to Australia for university and is more or less settled there, while Naoko is a high-powered suit in Tokyo doing something that Hajime still doesn't understand despite having gotten much closer to her during the last few months he'd been based out of the city working with the National team. Haruki, Shigeru, and Yui – mother of Nanao-chan, resident Miya fanatic – are still in Kyushu.

Hajime hasn't been back since he'd left for grad school. It's – it's good. It's something Hajime didn't know he needed, having something else to fully focus on. He feels a little bit like a tourist taking the trips to the surrounding islands and it's only alleviated because they're staying with Hiyori oba-san and staying with family automatically removes seventy-percent of the tourist experience. Hajime eats and sleeps and does a maximum of one outdoor activity a day, finally executing on the do-nothing time he'd planned. He spends a great deal of time with Nanao, putting up easy sets for her to gleefully smack down.

"You want to be a hitter?" he asks her the very first time she begs him to play. Nanao's interest in volleyball is 1) very new, 2) very much related to the Team Japan matches she saw a few weeks earlier, and 3) very much not shared by anyone else around her. "Not a setter like your boyfriend?"

Nanao's face grows red. "He's not my boyfriend!"

"He can be." Hajime keeps all emotion off his face. "I'll put in a good word for you. But you have to be careful when you break-up with him. He's kinda sensitive. I guess the girls like that, huh?"

"Oji-chan!" she howls in embarrassment. "Stop making fun!"

"Okay, okay," he ruffles her hair. "No more teasing. You want to be the spiker for your favourite setter – I get that."

"Atsumu-san's not just my favourite," huffs Nanao. "He's also the *best*. They should let him play more."

Hajime figures now's not the time to explain that Japan unfortunately didn't have the best setter of their generation in their roster – yes, he's biased, no, he's not sorry about it – but he does promise her that the next time they see each other they'll definitely go watch Miya Atsumu play one of his regular league games. It apparently hadn't occurred to Nanao that volleyball matches are happening all throughout the year because she gasps when she hears it.

Nanao-chan had been just a baby the last time Hajime saw her. The love he'd felt toward her then hadn't been quite like this: a genuine fondness of the person she was becoming.

Again, he thinks about what Oikawa had said. *It's going to be harder to leave this time*. Again, the weight of it hits him as he looks at Nanao. This isn't how it will always be – chatting with his energetic niece in the backyard of her grandparents' home – just like how the last couple of weeks with Oikawa hadn't been. Hajime's real life is still waiting for him to get back to.

As though the universe wants Hajime to deal with all his existential crises in one shot, Dad drops another bomb on him a few days into their time in Kyushu: "Mom and I were thinking of moving down here after retiring," Dad tells him. "Still a couple years to go, but... well, it's something we're thinking about."

"Oh," says Hajime. He hadn't expected this.

"If you ever end up moving back to Japan, then of course we'll try to be closer to you," says Dad. "But Mom and I – we don't want you to

worry, Hajime."

It's Hajime's job to worry. And in this – in this he feels stupid for not having thought of it before. About the reality of his parents getting older, how that'll change the support they need. At their age, with the life they're used to – taking his parents to California with him was never a real option, even if he *had* thought about it. Maybe in LA or San Francisco, where there's enough of a Japanese community that they could get by with their limited English but... it would still be uprooting them from everything they know.

"No, I get it." He wishes *getting it* didn't feel like he's betraying them, somehow. For the first time, Hajime wonders if going back overseas even makes sense for him in the long run, when he knows he has to be – he *wants* to be – back here at one point for Mom and Dad, for himself. "It's – it'll be better for you and Mom to have family around."

"Like I said, we haven't decided anything yet," says Dad reassuringly. "It's just something your oba-san brought up the other day and, well, I thought I should pass it along. And!" Dad's expression brightens. "Imagine how convenient it would be. If you ever find someone you want to bring home they can meet the entire family in one shot!"

And then he amends, "Except Kyou, but I suppose that's not a huge loss..."

Hajime knows exactly what his dad is doing with this, and he gratefully accepts the exit. He doesn't know what else he can say about the prospect of his parents moving across the country in a few years because Hajime won't be there to take care of them.

"Dad!" he scolds instead. "That's your nephew!"

Dad looks taken aback at Hajime's outburst. "Yes, he is?"

"Are you seriously holding onto a grudge because he was mean to Oikawa once when they were twelve?"

"I was only joking," he says, giving Hajime a what-the-hell's-the-matter-with-you look. Hajime stares back, unimpressed. Dad's not fooling anyone. That was maybe – *maybe* – only fifteen percent a

joke. "Though I was sure you actually *did* hold a grudge for that same reason. You've been quite cold to him since then."

"That's different," says Hajime, because it is. "You're an adult."

"I suppose I should let you young people resolve your own squabbles," sighs Dad. Hajime's lucky to not have the kind of parents who respond with, *well, so are you*. At least in this specific scenario. "Though of course Tooru-kun is very important to us Iwaizumis. He's practically part of the family."

And there lies the problem.

Hajime remembers being on the phone with Oikawa a few months ago, trying to figure out the logistics of having his parents stay in Hajime's Tokyo apartment for the three weeks they'd be in the city to see the games. Uncle and Auntie Oikawa shelling out the exorbitant Olympics-premium for a hotel had been unacceptable. This had been the plan the second Hajime signed his lease – which in itself had been months after Oikawa's position as starting setter had been confirmed, making it a foregone conclusion Uncle and Auntie would be coming to Tokyo.

It didn't matter how much money Shittykawa was raking in these days. Uncle and Auntie enjoy traveling but hate staying in hotels. Hajime's place was a twenty minute train ride to the stadiums. Hajime himself would be living at the village during that time. The absence of any one of these factors would give the other side of the debate a leg to stand on, but they don't. Of course Hajime was going to house them. He would shrivel up in shame if he'd let anything else happen.

"It's true that they'd be more comfortable in a proper house," Oikawa had mused on the phone, with all the wisdom of a fully functioning

adult son who gives up the reins of his apartment to his mom for weeks at a time whenever she visits. "And their generational hangups of staying at an airbnb wouldn't be an issue if it's their darling *Hajime's* place."

"You gotta make sure they don't do something crazy like try to give me money," says Hajime, which Oikawa summarily ignored to murmur, "Especially if they want to be here to watch me in the finals..."

"And then watch you lose against Japan?" Hajime said, and Oikawa scoffed, "It's cute that you think you'll make it past the qualifiers."

Shaking his head, Hajime said, "Tell Auntie to call me once you've convinced them," and that had been that. Hajime helped Uncle and Auntie figure out their train tickets and when the time came, met them at Ueno station when they arrived. He made sure the apartment was spotless, filled his fridge with a week's worth of groceries, secured extra doorkeys, and showed them to the nearest combini and subway entrance.

Hajime had traveled with them to the stadium early morning the day of the opening ceremonies. There'd been a period of three minutes between their arrival and Hajime handing Uncle and Auntie Oikawa to their son – during which time he'd run into Yaku and Bokuto zipped up in their Team Japan gear. Hajime had barely gotten through with introductions when a harassed looking Oikawa popped in and hissed, "Mom! Dad! How could you! You're cohorting with the *enemy*," and steered them away – but not before throwing the three of them a nasty glare.

"Thank you for taking care of us, Hajime," Uncle had said, letting himself be dragged away by Oikawa. "We should be able to make our way back ourselves. Nice to meet the rest of you boys!"

"Message me if there are any problems," Hajime had called back, to which Oikawa had shouted, "What is this? They're retired, not *incompetent*." Then back to his parents, "You shouldn't bother Iwa-chan while he's at work unless it's intentional sabotage–"

Hajime remembers vividly wishing he had a dumbbell handy to

throw at the back of Shittykawa's head when Bokuto had slapped his back hard enough to knock the air out. "Iwaizumi! Your in-law game is off the charts, man! I didn't even know it was possible to get to this level." He'd swung an arm around Hajime's shoulder. "Where were you when I was popping the question and needed to knock the parents off their feet, huh?"

"What? No – *no*. I've known them since I was a kid. They're just staying at my place while they're down here."

"*Bro*." Bokuto's grin had told Hajime that his response had the exact opposite effect of what he'd been hoping for. "You're looking after them even without your boy there?"

"Cut that out," muttered Hajime. "Oikawa's not – our families are close."

"Your families are close," Yaku had repeated, raising his eyebrows. "That's what's going on here, huh?"

Hearing Dad say this now – *Tooru-kun is practically part of the family* – Hajime feels the same way he did when he'd seen the look on Yaku's face. He remembers feeling it again a week later when Hajime had moved out of the Village when his team had finished competing and had spent the next two days in the stands with Uncle and Auntie and taking them to dinner afterward, somehow getting bullied out of paying the bill both times.

Hajime could have a hundred things happening, a hundred things to worry about – but Oikawa's presence somehow pops in for every one of them. Some because of those shared years they came to be themselves, but others because Hajime thinks about him, thinks about how to keep their diverging paths closer so they're always within each other's sight. And it's hard, of course it is, but not as much as it could be – especially not with Oikawa stubbornly making himself comfortable in every part of Hajime's life, with the people in it.

There's no getting away from it, even while at the other side of the country. Hell, there's no getting away from it on the other side of the ocean. Hadn't David texted, *dude your boy's serves are [flame emoji]*

[flame emoji] [flame emoji], to Hajime during Oikawa's final match? There's not a single part of Hajime's existence without Oikawa's fingerprints all over it. His aunts and uncles and cousins know him. His friends from Tohoku in undergrad. Utsui-san, when he first met Hajime: "Oh, I'm familiar with your high school. Wakatoshi told me about your setter. Oikawa, was it?" Half the starters in the National team have some weird personal history with Oikawa that leaves Hajime constantly having to say "No," to both sides. Oikawa, whose recklessness and drive and hunger had been the catalyst for Hajime pursuing his profession in the first place.

There's no Hajime without Oikawa. If there is, Hajime wouldn't be able to recognize him. He wouldn't be able to recognize that person's life.

It's how it's always been. It's probably how it always will be. There's no moving on from someone who's as part of him as his own blood. Hajime knows this, has known it for years. It's one of the reasons he's never really tried to move on from these feelings. Ever since he understood what's always been there – even when Hajime was four feet tall and this sense of responsibility for and commitment toward Oikawa had been easily labeled *best friend* instead of, *Tooru, whatever that means* – he doesn't know who he'd be without it.

Hajime spent the last two and a half years trying his hardest not to linger on these thoughts but the last two and a half weeks obliterated all the carefully cultivated discipline.

Now, there's no putting it out of his mind.

He thinks about this on his last night in Kagoshima, as he's done every night preceding. It's there in the back of his mind as he heads back home to Sendai, says goodbye to his family and friends one more time before boarding on his flight, as he eases back into his life in the States after this months-long blip in Japan. He's still thinking about it five weeks later when he receives a message from Hanamaki one Sunday evening, comprising a URL ending with /oikawa-tooru-gq-interview-jpy-translation.html and an accompanying, *bro, please, SHOOT YOUR SHOT.*

He doesn't really stop thinking about it – not until he opens the link

to the feature Oikawa's been bragging about since the start of their time in Sendai.

Two minutes later, what Hajime thinks is: *shit*.

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OIKAWA: *I don't make decisions lightly, but in most situations I also don't think there's much value in waiting. There's usually never a right time to do anything. There'll always be safer options, conflicting responsibilities. If you've really thought it through and you know what you want, and you think you really have a shot – then you owe it to yourself to not waste another second. And I'm not trying to downplay the reality of it. It'll be hard. There'll be problems. But you have to suck it up and figure it out and give it your best before giving up. And you always start by taking that first step.*

GQ: *How has that mindset worked out for you?*

OIKAWA: *The outcomes have been mixed, but I don't regret a single thing about the path I walked. Personally or professionally.*

GQ: *Can you elaborate on that a little?*

OIKAWA: *During the Olympic games, the Japanese media mentioned that I never played in any national tournaments while I was in the middle and high school circuit. How I never had the chance to be scouted at that level and it made sense to pursue other options. But what most people don't know is that I made the call to come to San Juan even before Seijoh – Aoba Johsai, that's the name of my high school – lost that final shot at making it to high school nationals. I had actually decided that just two*

weeks after losing my second-to-last tournament.

Everybody thought I was crazy. Even my parents and big sister, who have been unconditionally supportive of my dedication to volleyball since elementary school – even they told me to take more time. It was too big of a decision. And to their defence, for the weeks leading up to it I had been so uncertain about my future as a professional player that I had seriously considered pursuing a different path.

But after I met Jose Blanco, I knew what I wanted to do. He told me something that I never thought of before: that the skill level I was at at eighteen – chances were that I hadn't reached my full potential yet. He asked me if I was okay never knowing what that potential looked like.

After that, what I had to do next was very clear to me. I didn't need more time to think – my reasons wouldn't change. I knew my own mind. I knew why I was making this choice. I knew what the risks were, what the obstacles were, and how little the chances were for success. I chose to come to San Juan knowing those facts. I actually had a piece of paper where I wrote all these things down. I'd carry it around and read it whenever I had second thoughts. I reminded myself that those obstacles and those probabilities – they were acceptable to me. What wasn't acceptable was stopping where I was. Eventually, my family and friends realized this was right for me too.

GQ: *You were only eighteen. I can't imagine having the confidence to make such a huge decision when everyone else in my life had so many doubts.*

OIKAWA: *Hah. I actually did have one supporter from the get go. The ace of our high school team – who also happened to be my best friend since we were four. He still is today. When I told him about going overseas, all he said was, "Good. If you'd decided to quit, I'd have had to break your nose a second time."*

GQ: *The second time?*

OIKAWA: *You have to understand that Iwa-chan's methods are barbaric and he belongs in a zoo. I'm not joking! He's the worst. But he also never once stopped believing in me as both a volleyball player and a person. I wouldn't be who I am without him.*

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Hajime's in his kitchen.

He's in his kitchen and he's sitting at the counter that also serves as the dining table. His laptop's open in front of him. It's displaying Liam Neeson's face from where he had paused his rewatch of *Taken* when he received Hanamaki's text. The semi-permanent drip-drip-drip of his sink is echoing in the room and everything is too normal, too mundane for Hajime to be feeling this way: like the ground's disappeared from under him and he's in an endless freefall.

I didn't need more time to think.

Hajime can hear the words spoken in Oikawa's voice. It's the way he states facts – not casually or dismissively, but with an unmistakable, unshakable certainty. There's no question as to who said it. *My reasons wouldn't change. I knew my own mind. I knew why I was making this choice.* Hajime's eyes flick up to, *I don't regret a single thing about the path I walked. Personally or professionally.*

Then back up to the start: *There's usually never a right time to do anything.*

The conversation he had with Juan almost a month ago now is suddenly at the forefront of his brain. "Tooru doesn't believe in the right time," Juan had said. "Even though it was just a week before his flight, he respects me more for saying it." And Hajime knows this to be true, had known it when Juan had said it. Hajime remembers thinking, *You're wrong, you're giving up on him over something that's not even true*, because Juan hadn't believed that Oikawa could and did

mean it when he said he'd slow down. He knows that once Oikawa decides something – he doesn't wait. Oikawa's smart, and never more so than when he turns his razor sharp mind toward himself. Sometimes he doesn't have all the facts but – but he always makes his decisions based on what he knows to be true, about himself and the world.

"I kissed you because I meant it," Oikawa had told Hajime five weeks ago. "Do you think I'd go after someone who already rejected me if I didn't mean it? That this would be happening if it was anyone other than you?" and Hajime hadn't–

Hajime had thought–

Just a few weeks ago, Oikawa had said, almost bitterly, "You know me so well, do you?" And Hajime does, he does know him. *I don't make decisions lightly*, Oikawa said for this journalist. *I know my own mind*. Hajime knows all these things. Hajime knows them. These are basic facts of the universe. But somehow – somehow, something else had overtaken the facts of the universe.

Not just at the moment, but for the days and weeks following that horrible night Hajime had said, "don't do this." Something had cast a shadow over this truth until right this very second, when the words displayed in the glowing screen in his hands had been bright enough to burn that shadow away.

Right now, Hajime can only look back at the events of that night with a strange, almost detached horror. Absolutely nothing's changed in his recollection. The only thing that's different is the lens through which he's looking at Oikawa. The switch to, *he meant it*, a sharp shift away from, *I know you think you mean it, but you don't know what you want*.

Hajime – Hajime can't believe he actually said those words to Oikawa. He can't believe it made sense when he did. As though Hajime knew Oikawa better than Oikawa did. As though it's possible for there to be a difference between meaning something and *thinking* you meant something. An assertion there's no way to prove, a rationale so flimsy it falls to pieces under the barest scrutiny. A rationale clumsily pulled together to make Oikawa responsible for

Hajime making the decision he did.

What the fuck is wrong with him? Why would he—

He nearly drops his phone when the screen changes to show an incoming video call request.

He glances down and it – it's Mom. One of only three people who Hajime physically cannot decline a call from no matter what kind of personal crisis he's going through.

Hajime has to get it together. Something could have happened. Hajime just talked to his parents Friday night. He needs to get it together and see why his mom is calling and focus on her for five minutes. He can do this.

He can do this.

"Hajime!" she greets him cheerfully. Behind her, Dad waves. "How was your day, sweetheart?" she asks. "What did you have for dinner?"

"Hey," says Hajime and goes ahead to answer her questions the best he can when *I meant it*, is hammering around in his head. Then, instead of saying, *I'm actually in the middle of something right now, can I call you back?* like he's done in the past, he stupidly goes, "How're you guys?"

"Oh, nothing much has happened with us since we talked the other day," answers Mom. Hajime struggles to keep up with what she's saying when his mind's looping through every single thing he and Oikawa had said to each other in those last few days in Sendai. "But there's some exciting news from other parts of the family! Your cousin Haruki is getting married!"

"Oh," says Hajime, who couldn't possibly care less about someone else's love life right now. "Congratulations."

"I really thought it would take him another year at least to get there," informs Mom. "The Iwaizumi men are quite cautious about these things, aren't they? But your oba-san's over the moon. You know she's been worried ever since Haruki hit thirty and— hey! Honey, be careful—"

Dad's face has suddenly taken up the entirety of Hajime's phone. "What's wrong with you, Hajime?"

Hajime startles. "What? Nothing."

"Did something happen?"

"No?" Yes.

"Hmm," says Dad. He squints. "Are you sure about that?"

"What are you talking about?" Mom's back on screen, and she's also squinting concernedly. "Hajime, what's Dad talking about?"

Hajime opens his mouth to refute, and then closes it. His stomach twists as he remembers that argument they had in Oikawa's room, when Hajime had been so sure Oikawa had been lying. "What am I lying about?" Oikawa had asked him, and Hajime hadn't been able to pinpoint it then. Not when Oikawa had been laying everything out so neatly, the logic obvious and in line with the worst case scenario Hajime had been certain about.

But now he knows: Oikawa had been lying when he'd said Hajime was right. Oikawa had been lying when he'd agreed with Hajime that he hadn't known what he was doing. That he hadn't known his own mind.

And yet the more troubling part is that Oikawa would make such a concession out loud. *Especially* when he didn't mean it. Oikawa takes pride in this piece of himself. He doesn't do anything without knowing exactly why he's doing it. So why would he—

"I," says Hajime. He's barely able to process his parents' faces in front of him. The tenuous grip he has on his thoughts gets worse the longer he thinks, *Oikawa meant it*. Followed by, *and I told him no*. "I – I made a mistake."

"What happened?" asks Dad.

Hajime is twenty-six years old. He doesn't think he's come to his parents for advice on anything since discussing grad school applications. He hasn't even told them that there was a fifty-fifty

chance they'd end up with a son-in-law instead of a daughter after coming to that revelation during his second year of university. Mostly their conversations about relationships follow the same pattern of Hajime saying, "Yeah, I'm seeing someone," and his parents saying, "Well, tell us about them!" and Hajime responding, "I will if it gets serious," and his parents going, "Hajime, what are we supposed to do with you?!"

It isn't a reflection on how much Hajime loves them and trusts them and wants them involved in his life. Hajime is just – he's just like this. Hajime doesn't talk about his feelings with others. He never has. He has no problem consulting people when he's out of his depth on practical things – from when he was navigating his visa application to subletting his place in Irvine to learning how to be a better cook after moving to the States, when he'd video call Mom and have her gleefully boss him around the kitchen – but when it comes to these things – he just – he can't. It's too much. It doesn't matter who it is. It's too much to share. It's too much to put on them.

So it's saying something that in response to Dad's question, Hajime blankly states, "I'm in love with Oikawa."

His parents exchange a look with one another.

Later, when Hajime isn't in a state of shock, his respect for their self-restraint will shoot through the roof for not reacting the way they probably would have if he hadn't so ominously prefaced his admission. As it is, Mom tentatively says, "Is that... the mistake?"

Hajime aggressively stares at his hands. How does he even begin to explain? "Not exactly."

"Then what is it?"

No matter how mortifying the prospect of sharing the biggest screw-up of his life to his parents is – Hajime knows there's no one else he'd be able to say this to. Hanamaki and Matsukawa? Hajime would literally rather die. His other friends? They don't know Oikawa well enough, they don't know Hajime *with* Oikawa. For better or for worse, his parents are the people best positioned to understand what Oikawa means to him, the stakes involved. They've known and cared

for Oikawa for as long as Hajime has, and Hajime–

Hajime has to say it. There are too many things Hajime hasn't said over the years that's built up inside of him and somebody – somebody needs to know the full extent of this mess Hajime's created.

"Hajime?" prompts Dad. "You can tell us," he says and it's not like Hajime's been able to look at his parents for the last thirty seconds but he still squeezes his eyes shut before saying, "You remember that winter, when Dad – when Dad had the accident?"

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Once Hajime starts, the words tumble out of him startlingly easily.

He tells them everything. From the unexpected confession during high school to the absolute disaster of this past summer to Hajime's own journey in understanding his sexuality, bridging those first two points. How this thing with Oikawa goes back even further than all that. How he hadn't known how to categorize something that's been there for as long as he could remember. Something that had always been different than anything else.

And then he tells them about this summer. He tells them what happened during Oikawa's last week at Sendai and why Hajime had been so sure it couldn't have possibly worked.

His hands are shaking by the time he stops. When he finally turns to look at his phone again, he finds Mom and Dad silently looking back at him through the screen five thousand miles away. They look – shocked. Hajime doesn't blame them. He doesn't think he's ever talked for so long – and about something so personal – before in his life.

When Mom speaks, she doesn't say, "How is it possible I raised such a dumbass?" which is a huge credit on her part because Hajime knows he wouldn't be this charitable if a kid of his spilled this story to him. But what she does say is, "Oh, Hajime," with such weight behind it that it basically amounts to the same thing. "This is... quite something."

"Yeah." Hajime grabs his water bottle sitting innocently beside his laptop and chugs its contents down. "Yeah, that sums it up."

If Mom sounded overwhelmed but sympathetic, Dad sounds the exact opposite when he says, "So what are you going to do about it?"

Hajime stares at him. "What d'you mean?"

Dad stares back. "Now that you understand all this – though I suppose there are still some things only Tooru-kun will be able to confirm for you – but nonetheless. Now that you're fairly certain that Tooru-kun is interested in you–"

"Oh my God," says Hajime, wishing he could disappear. That strange, hollowed tranquility he felt in the moments after he finished telling them is not worth the sheer horror he feels now in hearing his dad say, *Tooru-kun is interested in you.*

"–what are you going to do?" The way Dad asks this makes it clear that there's a right answer. "You said you made a mistake, Hajime. And mistakes usually have a fix."

"Dad's right," says Mom. "Hajime, you clearly love Tooru-kun very much. Even more than what Dad and I knew from before. He's the person who's closest to you and... and you were afraid of what that meant, and what you had to lose. You were worried about everything that could go wrong. You had wanted this for so long and spent so long thinking it could never happen that it made you doubt when it did. You chose the option that you thought was the safest for your heart and – and now you wish you didn't. Do I have that right?"

Hajime nods stiffly, unable to speak. It's hard. It's so unfathomably difficult – to hear her put the monumental truth behind each and every misstep Hajime has taken in such frank terms.

"So let me tell you this, having understood all of that: Hajime, it's okay."

"It's not," chokes Hajime, because it's not, and Mom shouldn't be saying that it is. He tries to imagine kissing Oikawa and having Oikawa push him away, having Oikawa say, *you don't really want this*, reducing this wildfire truth inside of Hajime into nothing. How do you get over that? How do you forgive it?

"Hajime," interrupts Dad, uncharacteristically stern. "Listen to your parents. It's not like you did something bad. You didn't lie or cheat or try to harm Tooru-kun, or deceive him. You just – you didn't understand something. You made a mistake. People make mistakes all the time. It's what you do next that's important."

And somehow – somehow that seizes Hajime by the back of his shirt and drags him out of his spiral.

Dad's words hit Hajime harder than, *I meant it*. Than, *I know my own mind*. It reminds him of what Oikawa had said back at the beginning of their time in Sendai: "I'm not going to sit around feeling sorry for myself." Oikawa had learned not to do that with defeats in volleyball, had learned not to do that with losses in his relationships. Hajime knows that it still cuts at him – "I'm not some kind of robot," Oikawa had bitten out – but he somehow can grit his teeth and drag himself forward.

"I messed up," says Hajime slowly. "But I don't think – I don't think I ruined anything. Me and Oikawa are – we're okay. I believe him when he says he's fine with moving past it."

"Are *you* fine with that?" presses Dad.

"That doesn't matter. It would be selfish and a burden to put this on him when he made it clear that he didn't want to bring this up again."

"But he doesn't know about your feelings," says Mom, brows drawing together. "He doesn't have all the information."

"And why would it be a burden?" asks Dad. "Did you feel that way

when Tooru-kun told you?"

"No!" Hajime recoils at the thought.

The only thing about Oikawa that Hajime has ever considered a burden is his own feelings for him. After all, it hadn't been until Hajime had realized the full extent of what it meant when Hajime said, *you're my best friend* in response to Oikawa's confession that the knowledge became unbearable. And even that was a weight Hajime would never have shed. It wasn't Oikawa's intentional doing, after all. Oikawa hadn't done anything but exist. All he did was not once falter – not in any way that matters – in being Hajime's friend.

"Then what are you going on about?"

"Sweetheart," says Mom. "I'm not just saying this as your mother, who wants the best for you and – and I'm sure it's not a surprise for you to hear that I think this could be *such* a good thing for you. Tooru-kun is – you know we love him–"

"Yeah." It's the first time Mom's said it out loud and in those words, but there's never been a doubt in Hajime that she and Dad felt this way. "Yeah, I know."

"I think over the years we've gotten to know him quite well," she says. "Not as well as you, of course, but – Hajime, honey, I'm absolutely positive that he would want to know that you care about him so much. I'm *sure* of it."

They're right. Of course they are. On the surface, it's easy to frame being silent as being selfless. After all, the last time they'd been yelling at each other, Oikawa had told him, *If there's a reason you and me aren't okay, it's because you're the one with the problem*. Oikawa had told him, *I was perfectly happy never talking about this again*.

But that's also when Oikawa had been lying. Hajime's been so weighed down by the magnitude of his fuck-up that the possibility of there still being a future where he and Oikawa are – are something else, something more – that possibility isn't something he's even started to process. But even if the chances are next to zero – does it matter? Does it change what he has to do? If Hajime takes a step

back, then another, and goes all the way back to that walk home after practice in high school, when Oikawa had said, *I can't give up until I've tried my best. Does that make sense, Iwa-chan? Does it make sense to you that I have to try?*, then Hajime is the worst sort of coward for hesitating now, after knowing everything he does. When Oikawa had said what he did at eighteen without anything to go on.

There are some things that are too important to risk on a gamble. Having Oikawa in his life is one of them. But if their friendship somehow survived Hajime saying, *don't do this* – then Hajime showing up at Oikawa's door and saying, *I'm in love with you and I was so stupid for not kissing you back* isn't going to ruin it. Even if Oikawa tells him no, that the time that they could've been something else had gone – Hajime knows that they'll be okay.

Because it wasn't their friendship that was ever at stake that night, was it?

Hajime has to close his eyes again.

He's such an idiot. Oikawa was right. Hajime is a record-breaking, award-winning moron.

"I understand why you didn't want to say anything when Tooru-kun was in a relationship," says Dad. "I think that was the right thing to do. But it's different now, isn't it? Unless," and here Dad hesitates, "unless *you'll* also find peace with not saying anything. If you think this is something that'll go away in time?"

"No." At least this is something that has an easy answer. He's had years to understand the reality of it. "No, it's not – it's not going to go away." He hesitates. "You guys – you don't think it's too soon? It's only been a couple months since he broke up with Juan. They were – you know how serious they were."

"I don't know," admits Mom. "All I can say is that we know that Tooru-kun certainly doesn't think it's too soon, and I think – I think that matters."

"When does it stop being too soon, anyway?" muses Dad. Then, defensively, "Why are both of you looking at me like that? I said that

seriously!"

"No, you're absolutely right," says Mom, laughing. "Dad's brought up a good question, Hajime. I suppose... I suppose that will always be an unknown, won't it? Whether we're acting too soon, or acting too late."

Could it really be that simple?

Because if it comes down to those two options – Hajime knows which he has to choose. He knows how Oikawa would answer: *There's never a right time to do anything*. And maybe that's true but there's definitely a *wrong* time for certain things. And Oikawa had said it himself, hadn't he? He's still not over Juan.

Even if – no, no, even *though* Hajime now knows and believes that Oikawa knew exactly what he was doing when he kissed Hajime that night and wanted the same things from Hajime that Hajime desperately wanted from him – Oikawa is still working through his feelings for another man. If Hajime goes through with telling all this to Oikawa, and if – and this one really is an if – Oikawa accepts his inadequate and overdue confession and they actually give this a shot – it won't change that.

That fact might not change for a very long time.

But what is also a fact is this:

"I never want to be too late again." Not with Oikawa. Not when simultaneous to all this is another truth: *I kissed you because I meant it. You're Iwa-chan. How could you ever be some kind of replacement?*

Hajime knows what he has to do. He doesn't know what'll happen after, but – he knows what has to happen next.

"You'll be fine," says Dad confidently. "What do the kids say these days? Keep fighting?"

Hajime is once again hit with an unbearable gratefulness. To have the two of them not just as a sounding board but to also provide a sensible second opinion. Maybe this is why people talk about their problems. But Hajime's – he's just not like that. He can't imagine this happening if he hadn't been on the brink of some kind of spiral, if Mom hadn't called at just the right moment.

And if she hadn't – maybe Hajime would've gotten here on his own. Maybe he wouldn't have concluded that it would be better to keep quiet for Oikawa's sake, that this was behind them now. But if he did, he knows he would've doubted himself more. It would've taken him longer. Long enough to tip into *too late*.

"Yeah," says Hajime. "Yeah, I will. Thank you guys. Sorry for dropping all this on you."

"Please," says Dad. "It makes sense now why you've never mentioned anyone special in all this time. Mom and I had wondered. We were just talking the other day about getting you in touch with a matchmaker auntie in America who could introduce you to people – your Shizuka oba-san's childhood friend is in the business, you know. And she's based out of San Francisco!"

The news is so shocking that Hajime chokes on his own spit.

"You want to set me up on an *omiai*?"

"Well, not *anymore*," says Dad. "Now that we know about what a top-tier prospect you have in Tooru-kun."

And just like that, a switch is flipped. His parents go from patiently supportive to unnervingly over-invested in the time it takes for Hajime to blink. It's so typical. Hajime wishes that this exasperated fondness he feels didn't come hand in hand with terror. A top-tier prospect. Hell. No matter how this goes, Oikawa can never, ever find out Dad said this.

"So are you going to call Tooru-kun, now?" says Mom. "Should Dad

and I hang up?"

"Uh," says Hajime. "I don't think this is the sort of thing I should say over the phone." Not least because he's certain Oikawa's going to end the call the second Hajime brings up the summer. Hajime wouldn't blame him for it.

Mom deflates. "Yes, you're right. These kinds of conversations are best had in person, aren't they?" She sighs, and Dad pats her comfortingly on the shoulder. "When are you seeing him next? Is it when you're back here during the winter?"

There's absolutely no way Hajime is waiting another two months to see Oikawa.

Nothing good can come out of it. Hajime doesn't want to ever be too late again. What is it that Oikawa had said? *If you've really thought it through and you know what you want, and you think you really have a shot – then you owe it to yourself to not waste another second.* After all, it hadn't been patience or indecision that had stopped Hajime before. Hajime isn't a patient or indecisive person. He's at his best when he's making plans and acting on them. It just so happened that all this time Hajime had been arriving at a different conclusion. The wrong one.

He's come to a different conclusion now. Hopefully it's the right one this time.

It's just his luck that he's coming to this decision when Oikawa's in another continent instead of down the goddamn street.

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Like the last time Hajime did something this bullheaded, he'll only be

traveling with a bag over his shoulders.

Unlike the last time, getting to this point had been a nightmare and a half. Taking two personal days and rescheduling his appointments were the least of it – more harrowing was making sure Oikawa wouldn't be in the middle of a stretch on the road for away games when Hajime actually got there and figuring out a place to stay for two nights in case things went badly.

"You're gonna be home Thursday night, right?" Hajime asks the evening before his flight. He knows the answer already – from quadruple checking the team's schedule online and also texting Mateo to confirm the team didn't have practice the next day, somehow getting conned into answering truthfully to, "why d'you wanna know?", and subsequently swearing the man to secrecy – but he can't help it.

It's t-minus nineteen hours until the scheduled departure. He needs to put these last minute worries to rest. At the top of that list is showing up at Oikawa's place after a twenty-four hour trip and finding out that he's on the other side of the country.

The small sound Oikawa makes in affirmation was sleepy. Their three hour time-gap isn't so bad on the weekends, but it's irritating as hell during the week because pro athletes and grandmas had the exact same bed times. By the time Hajime makes it home around seven, Oikawa's already getting ready to turn in for the night so he can be up at the crack of dawn for morning practice.

"Yeah, I should be," he says. "Why, what's up?"

"We should talk then." Hajime's palms are sweating. "Figure out when you're coming in December." That isn't even a lie. That's one of the things Hajime wants to talk about when he sees Oikawa.

It's just. It's just number seventeen in terms of priority.

"Sounds good." For a second there, Oikawa agreeing so readily makes Hajime uneasy. And then he remembers that no matter how inevitably sketchy Hajime feels for planning a secret operation behind Oikawa's back, being on call with each other was something

they always did when buying flight tickets: the first time had been because Oikawa had been nervous about dropping JPY 170,000 without someone else there to share the responsibility (blame) in case "something went wrong" and somehow, that became the tradition.

"You're still going back to Japan after though, right?" Oikawa continues. "No way for Uncle and Auntie to fly out this year?"

This guy. "I'll see what they say," Hajime promises and the beat of silence that follows is strange, as is Oikawa's laugh after.

"Yeah, okay." Hajime knows exactly how the smile on Oikawa's face must look right now. "You do that. Iwa-chan's slipping in his old age – how could he forget that getting to see Tooru-chan is a make or break factor for them?"

Oikawa says this in the way that he does when he knows he's full of shit, and he knows that the people around him know he's full of shit, and that somehow makes the joke even better. Usually he's right. Usually Oikawa's very good at this sort of thing.

Except this time – this time it's not a joke. The strangeness in Oikawa's laugh – the uncomfortable awareness that they're too intertwined with each other in a way that's difficult to explain. It had been easy to shrug off Matsukawa pointing out, "You know that this isn't normal, right," when they were first becoming friends in high school with a mutter of, "Absolutely nothing involving that bastard is normal. You'll see." It had been less easy a few years later, when his friends in undergrad would good-naturedly rib him with some variation of, "Well, the good news is that Iwaizumi's been trained to be the perfect boyfriend, if he ever gets around to becoming one," every time he ditched them to get on a call with Oikawa.

The fact of the matter is that Mom and Dad *will* be disappointed to not see Oikawa. This would've been the case even before that monumental conversation. Now, if Hajime's dumbass plan actually has the brightest-timeline outcome – Hajime is sure that his parents would fly across the ocean to see him.

"Just a break factor, you mean," corrects Hajime, heart in his throat. "I'll talk to you then, yeah?"

"Only if something better doesn't pop up," Oikawa chirps, most definitely in response to Hajime's dig. He hangs up before Hajime can respond and it's such quintessential Shittykawa that the longing to see him right then – to see Oikawa's face, the ornery tilt of his head – seizes Hajime with a staggering ferocity. He has to put his phone down and take a walk around his apartment to regain some equilibrium.

If everything goes the way Hajime hopes for it to – a chance that a week ago Hajime wouldn't have even entertained was worth taking – this won't be something weird to say. It would be expected. Because the way they've always been with each other is the way you are with someone who is categorically special, important. It's how you're supposed to be with the person who takes up the most real estate in your heart.

If it *doesn't* go that way–

No. No point thinking like a loser. It won't change what Hajime has to do.

Hajime's strangely clear headed leading up to his flight as he gets everything in order. It's the kind of focus that Hajime hasn't felt in ages – not since his days on the court, since that last match against Karasuno in high school. It's how he gets when the stakes are high and he can't afford to slip.

He can't afford to let Oikawa down.

Over the years, Hajime has learned that it's very difficult for a person to disappoint Oikawa. It's not the most apparent quality about him. After all, Oikawa has stubborn opinions on everything and everyone and the framework he uses to arrive at those opinions is one that the average person – this includes Hajime – would consider insane. He also holds numerous grudges and is frequently unfair and uncharitable with his words. The existence of those simultaneous characteristics suggest that it would be difficult to meet his expectations.

But what is less obvious: Oikawa only has expectations from those he trusts to meet them. When he says, *I'm counting on you*, he means, *I*

know you won't let me down. Not as a threat, but as a fact. Oikawa carefully decides who to rely on, and one of the criteria to get this designation is that they can be relied on. What is even less obvious than that: the exact nature of his expectations. It's something that Hajime knows only because he's lived through it. It's why Hajime knows that as far Oikawa's concerned, Seijoh has never let him down – if they had, then Oikawa wouldn't have stubbornly held their gazes even as he wept. If they had, Oikawa wouldn't have said, *thank you for the last three years.* It's why Hajime himself has never let Oikawa down with his clumsy responses – not when they were still so young and Hajime said, *you're my best friend,* and not eight years later, when he said the same. If he had, then Oikawa wouldn't have said, *you don't have to say anything else.* He wouldn't have said, *I'll miss you, Iwa-chan.*

The only real way to disappoint Oikawa is if someone doesn't give it their all.

It's why he knows that Oikawa will be disappointed when Hajime tells him everything. When he finds out that the reason Hajime never said anything that day wasn't because there wasn't anything to say, but because Hajime couldn't bring himself to.

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And yet thirty-six hours later, an exhausted Hajime arrives at the door of Oikawa's San Juan apartment for just that reason.

He's really doing this.

Hajime is really about to tell Oikawa that he's been in love with him for years and ask him for a chance to make it right. Oikawa. His best friend, his setter, his captain. His partner, his family. The single boldest, brightest, most frustrating, bullheaded, astounding human being Hajime's ever met. Who has steadfastly kept his position as Hajime's favourite person for longer than Hajime can remember.

Hajime may not have stopped thinking about what's coming since the moment he resolved to follow through with it – but the hugeness of it hits him once again in one frightening swoop as he stares at the door to apartment 1404.

This is really going to happen.

He calls Oikawa.

"Okay, so I'm thinking the eighteenth to the twenty-third," Oikawa starts after a single ring. The image of how he must look twenty feet away on the other side of the door forms with vivid clarity: squinting at Google Flights on his laptop from behind his glasses, put on after a shower. Likely he's thrown a knitted blanket around his shoulders, a six-foot tall grandma with a shawl, because the temperature's dipped at night and Oikawa's always carried on his parents' tradition of keeping indoor temperatures low. "Enough time for a road trip! The flight I'm looking at gets in pretty late though so really it's more like the nineteenth..."

"That's still five days." That's almost half the time Oikawa's going to have off.

"Yeah, and I'm gonna set your precious cactus collection on fire if you don't take at least one day off tacked onto the weekend," he grumbles, no doubt remembering the one time Hajime had to leave Oikawa to fend for himself for two days because Lily had come down with the flu and Hajime had to be called in to cover her immediate appointments. "What a shame that'd be after Priya did the hard work of keeping them alive for the last year."

"Try it and see what happens, asshole," says Hajime, to which Oikawa replies, "Oh, I will. You think I make idle threats?" And then without waiting for an answer to what was undoubtedly a rhetorical question with a well known answer, "So what d'you think? The flight would get in at 11pm your time."

Hajime can't have this entire conversation standing in the 15th floor hallway of Oikawa's building waiting for the right time.

"That sounds like it'll work," he starts and thinks – perhaps not so bizarrely – of the Shia LaBeouf gif he frequently sends David: *Just do it*. Just do it. "But I wanted to talk to you about something first."

Oikawa says, "Okay," and there's no room for hesitation here. Hajime owes this to Oikawa. He owes this to himself. He owes this to the USD 2,100 he spent on the last minute flight here. He's come too far – in many, many different ways – to bail.

Hajime says, "I'm, uh. I'm outside your apartment," and accompanies that piece of news with two loud knocks.

There is complete, resounding silence from Oikawa's end of the call.

Then–

"What?" says Oikawa blankly.

"Yeah," says Hajime. "Yeah, I know. Just – could you let me in? I'll explain."

-

Predictably, any sort of control Hajime thought he had over this situation is immediately stolen by Oikawa the second he throws open

the door and looks at Hajime with a mixture of bewilderment and suspicion. It's so far removed from how he'd reacted the last time Hajime'd shown up with no warning – for his twenty-fourth birthday, a surprise organized by Juan that had Oikawa screaming with glee – that it would be hilarious if it wasn't fanning the flames of Hajime's anxiety.

"What d'you mean you'll explain?" demands Oikawa, even as he scoots out of the way so that Hajime can step inside. He looks exactly how Hajime had imagined on the other side of the door – hair soft and tousled and ready for bed, squinting suspiciously at Hajime from behind his thick framed glasses – except he's in a ratty, "only around the house" navy cardigan instead of his grandma blanket.

"What are you doing here? How'd you get into the building? Don't you have work tomorrow? Did you quit? Is this some kind of midlife crisis?"

There's a lot to unpack. Hajime decides to answer the easiest one.

"I followed in a family of four," he admits, taking off his shoes. "Wasn't my greatest moment."

"You – Iwa-chan!" Oikawa yells as Hajime places his bag by the door. "That's the least important part!" He grabs Hajime by the elbow and shakes him. "*What is going on?* And don't try and tell me this is just some kind of fun, surprise visit, you jerk."

"It's not." It's hard to look Oikawa in the eye right now. But it's outright impossible to look away from him. "I – I know how this looks but. I needed to talk to you and – it had to be in person."

Oikawa looks at him like he thinks Hajime's gone crazy.

"You needed to – what does that even mean? Have you completely lost it?"

Hajime rubs his forehead, thumb pressed against his pulsing temple. Of course the headache that he's been able to successfully ignore for the last leg of his journey is suddenly kicking his ass within a minute of being in Oikawa's presence.

"What's so top secret you couldn't tell me on the phone?" Oikawa presses. He still has an iron grip on Hajime's elbow, both of them still in the entryway. "Are you sick? Are you dying? Because even that you could've called and I'd have come to you!" He pauses. And then, very cautiously, "Iwa-chan. You're *not*—"

"No! No I'm not dying—"

"Then what could you *possibly*—"

Hajime realizes right then that with Oikawa, there's never going to be a better time – or even just a good time – to bring it up. Oikawa's irritatingly good at bowling people over with the intensity of his personality. Even Hajime, who came here for a singular purpose and should be immune to this, is finding himself on the verge of being swept away by the barrage of his questions, by the worry that's lining Oikawa's face.

It has to be now.

What are you doing here? Oikawa had asked the second he opened the door.

Hajime answers, "I'm in love with you."

And then it's done.

It's done.

Hajime's said it, and now Oikawa knows. *I'm in love with you.* Oikawa now knows the only secret Hajime's kept from him for so many years, a secret that had been Oikawa's to hear all those weeks ago. There's no going back now. Everything that happens with the two of them from here on out is going to have to be with this truth between them: Hajime's in love with Oikawa.

He has less than a second to experience the simultaneous flood of elation and terror and relief before Oikawa yanks his hand away from where it'd been clutching Hajime's arm.

That look from earlier is back on Oikawa's face. The one that had been followed with *have you completely lost it?*

"What?" Oikawa takes a step back. "What the hell is this?"

"I'm in love with you," repeats Hajime. "I've been for – for a long time. I should have told you that before, in the summer when you—" He can't say it, can't say what happened without psyching himself out of it. Instead he says the most important part: "I fucked up. There's no two ways about this. And with everything that happened – I didn't want to say that over a call. That's why I'm here."

Oikawa just stares at him.

He stares at Hajime for what's probably ten seconds but might as well be forty-three minutes. Hajime tries to think of any other time he's felt so awkward around Oikawa and draws a blank.

And just as he opens his mouth to say – something, maybe, *I know this is a lot to dump on you but if you could just tell me whether you want me to stick around or get out* – the wooden expression on Oikawa's face starts to crack.

"Tooru," starts Hajime, but is met with a sharp-eyed glare. Without a word, Oikawa turns around and stomps – not walks, but *stomps* – deeper into his apartment.

Hajime follows Oikawa into the living room, with its matching gray couches and an unnecessarily large television and the plush rug

covering the hardwood floor. All familiar pieces, but Hajime can't help but think that something looks... off. And then he remembers: Juan. Of course. He must've packed up some things when he left.

He quickly sets aside the weirdness the thought brings. Hajime reminds himself that it's the same place Oikawa's been in since he moved out of the Blancos' guest room, where he'd lived during his first season with the CA San Juan. On the bottom shelf is half of Oikawa's embarrassing shoujo manga collection that he'd checked in an entire suitcase to bring overseas once he got his own place. Pictures of his friends and family lining the walls. Traces of Kaijuu-chan's black fur is everywhere, and Hajime knows that Kaijuu-chan herself had likely run to hide in the bathroom the second she sensed someone else was present in her home.

No matter that this used to be someone else's home for a short period of time – it's still Oikawa's.

He doesn't have time to think further about it before Oikawa spins back around and crosses his arms across his chest.

"Are you going through something?" is the first thing Oikawa says. "Is this some kind of a coping mechanism?"

"Are you telling me," growls Hajime, because he really needs to put a stop to this, "that you think me having some kind of episode is more likely than me—"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying," Oikawa talks loudly enough to drown Hajime out. "If I call your work, or your mom, or your friends back home – none of them are going to tell me that you had a traumatizing thing happen and this is some kind of acting out?"

Hajime doesn't believe this. "*You're* the only traumatizing thing that's ever happened to me, Shittykawa."

"Answer the question, you stupid jerk!"

"For fuck's sake – no, all right?" Oikawa – who is only violent with his words when he's outside the court – looks ready to throw a punch. "No, I mean – that's my answer, you idiot. No, nothing

happened."

"Then start at the beginning. Why are you here? And don't—" Here Oikawa stumbles, just a little. "Don't go on again about how you're in love with me. That's not going to make sense no matter how many times you say it."

"That's the truth. That *is* why I'm here."

Oikawa doesn't look remotely moved. "You really want to do this? You're really sticking with that story?"

"What's so damn unbelievable about it?"

And – it's the wrong thing to say. It's the wrong thing to say and Hajime can see it by the unforgiving shift in Oikawa's face.

"*Maybe*," grits out Oikawa, "maybe because the last time we saw each other I *threw myself at you* and you said," Oikawa clears his throat to mockingly quote, "Oikawa, you're my best friend. Don't do this.' Maybe that's what's so *damn unbelievable* about this, Iwa-chan, that after all that, you expect me to buy that out of nowhere—"

"This isn't out of nowhere," interrupts Hajime because even though Hajime intentionally, carefully kept this piece of knowledge from Oikawa all this time – it's still a shock to have it confirmed: to know that Oikawa really had no idea about something that was a given truth of Hajime's world. To have to explain it now and have it backfire because of course, of course it would. Everything Oikawa's seen from him so far supported the exact opposite.

But like with so many things with Oikawa – so many things from the last few days – it doesn't change anything. It doesn't change what Hajime has to do. Because if this is the issue, if Oikawa thinks that this is some magical new thing for Hajime, some stupid ill-thought out impulse—

"Oikawa – this isn't some kind of revelation. I've known this for a long time, all right?" There's no room to hesitate here. To hold his cards close to his chest. Taking a deep, centering breath, Hajime says, "I've felt this way for years."

Oikawa flinches.

For the second time that night, he steps away from Hajime.

"That doesn't make any sense," Oikawa sounds almost accusing. "What do you mean *years*? If that was true—"

"It is true," Hajime stubbornly says, because it is.

"Then how's this the first time I'm hearing anything about this?"

Hajime can't believe this. "Are you being this stupid on purpose?"

"Are *you* seriously calling me names while trying to *confess*?" Oikawa shrills back.

"Yeah, because you're being a dumbass. Obviously I wasn't going to — you had a boyfriend! I'm not some kind of *homewrecker*." He forces himself to take a deep breath. "Do you remember that winter back home? When — when Dad had that accident." God. It's been — it's been almost three years now and still Hajime can barely talk about it. "I flew back because — because Mom said that you convinced her to call me. She wouldn't have, if you hadn't — if you hadn't Oikawa'ed your way into making her."

"Obviously I remember." But he no longer sounds — aggressive? Defensive? Whatever it had been all this time — now Oikawa just seems uneasy. "Why are you bringing that up?"

"Because that's how long," says Hajime. "Probably even before that, probably since we were kids but — that's when I realized what it meant. The minute Mom told me what you did."

It's amazing, in the worst possible way, how agonizing it is to witness Oikawa hear that and look like it's the last thing he ever wanted to know.

But then he says, "What exactly did Auntie tell you?"

With all the gentleness he's capable of, Hajime gruffly says, "We had — we had a huge fight about it the day Dad woke up. Pretty sure she told me all the big ticket stuff."

The jut of Oikawa's throat moves as he swallows. "If you knew what I said to her, then you would've broken down my door and knocked me out."

Hajime shakes his head. "I do know. You saved our relationship."

"Twa-chan, I told her that there was a very good chance Uncle was going to die," says Oikawa flatly. "And then I said that if she didn't want to lose her son along with her husband then she needed to get you on the phone."

Oikawa says this like it must be new information, as though there's no way for Hajime to feel the way he does if he knows this – except he's wrong on every count. Even the harshness of the exchange wasn't unexpected – Mom had never told him exactly what was said but Hajime wasn't a complete idiot. Hajime remembers that despite Oikawa's constant presence at the hospital with Hajime, he would make himself scarce whenever Mom would be in the room. The two of them had been so uneasy and awkward around each other, but there had been too many other things – Dad's recovery and everything that meant, Hajime's own life-changing realization about his feelings for Oikawa – that had taken priority.

But Hajime also remembers Mom bringing Oikawa into a crushing hug the day he was flying back out, remembers Oikawa hugging her back, eyes squeezed shut in a failed attempt to keep himself from crying into her shoulder.

"You saved our relationship," repeats Hajime. "If you hadn't said that, if you hadn't changed her mind and if you'd been the one to call me instead – I don't know. I don't know what would've happened but I know I'd never be able to look at my family the same way again."

Oikawa's shaking his head, but before he can say anything, Hajime ploughs forward: "I know you. I know you, and you know me, and you've been trampling all over my life, sticking your nose into my business since we were stupid little kids and I'm so fucking glad you did because it – it *is* your business. What happens with me and my life – you've got a say in it."

That's the only sign Hajime should've ever needed. "You know you

do," he continues. The words scratch his throat. "This is how it is. We live on two different continents and we still somehow made it so we can always have each other's back. You're the most important person in my life. I've called you my best friend for as long as I've known you and – and you are, but you've always been something else too. I swear this isn't anything new."

Oikawa's gaze is frozen on Hajime. His eyes are bright. He's breathing fast, shallow. Something about how he's looking at Hajime – almost frightened, obvious in a way that suggests he's too overwhelmed to keep up his usual guard – makes Hajime think that maybe – maybe Oikawa's starting to understand.

Hajime hopes he is, because there's nothing else left inside to be pulled out of him. There's nothing else he can say or do without Oikawa giving him some kind of hint, some direction. Hajime had thought he'd reached his lowest already when it came to this thing with Oikawa, but it turns out that he hadn't even been close. It's dizzying, the realization that even with everything – he still hasn't yet felt what it means to hit the ground and smash into pieces. He's still in freefall.

"You," whispers Oikawa, and Hajime braces himself for the impact, "you really are out of your mind, Iwa-chan," and Hajime–

Hajime loses it.

Oikawa is already turning away but Hajime seizes his wrist before Oikawa can step back.

"Why the hell is that so crazy?" yells Hajime. "I'd get it if you just told me to get lost or that I screwed it up or – or that you don't feel that way anymore but why – why do you keep saying that it's fucking crazy?"

And just like that, the brittle quality that Hajime had somehow managed to unearth through the past few painful minutes disappears behind a steel wall.

Not that having that soft part of Oikawa *out* of the steel walls for the last little while made a difference.

"Oh, I don't know!" Oikawa fires back. He looks even more incensed when he tries to pull his arm back and can't break away. "Maybe because those things aren't the problem?" and it's a credit to Oikawa's special ability to drive Hajime up the goddamn wall that the happiness those words ignite lasts exactly one second before it's smothered under frustration when Oikawa continues, "Why was it so crazy when I said it, huh?"

"It wasn't!" shouts Hajime. "I was an idiot!"

Later, Hajime's going to think about how easy it is to hurl these vulnerabilities at Oikawa when he can frame it to himself as an attack. Everything said until now had felt torn out of him, and yet somehow, this truth – exposing this weakness – is the easiest thing. It makes Hajime feel liberated.

It makes Hajime want to demand, *hah, let's see you try and argue against THAT, Shittykawa.*

"I was afraid you'd think it was a mistake." That strange exhilaration is still pumping through him. "I thought you weren't over Juan–"

"Well, you were right." Oikawa's gaze is challenging. He's not going to make this easy for Hajime and that's – that's fine. Hajime certainly hasn't made it easy either. "Guess this whole stunt was for nothing, then. Because I wasn't over him. I'm still not."

"Fine," says Hajime, because – because it is. Oikawa's not someone who would get over things like this. Not easily, and definitely not without it leaving some kind of mark. That's why it had been so stupid for Hajime to think that something like *bad timing* was why things had gone the way it did. "I get that and – it doesn't matter. Or it does, but." Hajime stops, frustrated at his own inability to explain. "It's you, Oikawa. That's going to be a part of you."

Hajime's figured out that there's no right thing for him to say here. Oikawa's just going to get angrier no matter what and he's proven right a second later when Oikawa goes:

"So suddenly that's okay now? All that crap you were saying before when I – how I was on a – a *rebound*, that I'd just go for you without being serious – that I couldn't possibly mean it–"

"You agreed with me!" Hajime knows that every wrong conclusion he's come to was because of his own problems, but that doesn't mean that there weren't other reasons it took him so long. As though Oikawa hadn't said with crushing finality, *I made a bad call that day. I didn't understand what I was doing. I got my head together that night, and it made even more sense while I was away and wasn't in this bubble with just the two of us. You were right. I wouldn't have done it if I was thinking straight.* "When we fought–"

"I was lying, you moron!" Oikawa shrieks and Hajime rears back from both the volume and the shock of hearing Oikawa's admission, even though Hajime had known in his gut that that had to have been the case. "How can someone be so stupid – and let go of me–"

This time before he tugs his arm away, Oikawa pries Hajime's hand off his wrist.

"Tooru–" he starts, but Oikawa's not having it.

"Don't *Tooru* me," he snaps. "Agreeing with you – what did you expect me to do, huh? You were completely off the mark about me but you – it didn't change the fact you were rejecting me – it didn't change that you were telling me that I must've gotten it wrong." Oikawa's volume steadily increases the more he speaks, as does his fury. "No seriously, I want to know. What did you want me to do, Iwa-chan? You rejected me twice! Saying the exact same thing! And you – what, did you want me to keep insisting I meant it? Keep begging you to change your mind? Try and *convince you* to look at me differently after you called me your friend, kept telling me not to push, not believing when I said I meant it, that I knew what I was doing?"

He makes a disgusted sound. "Please. I still have my pride. I still have my self-respect. I still – I still wanted my last few days with my best

friend not to be a complete mess."

This time when Hajime whispers, "Tooru," Oikawa doesn't correct him. "If you mean all this now," says Oikawa instead, "then it means you were lying. That you made me feel like shit for no reason—"

That's a low blow. "You think that I was messing around with you like that? That's what you think of me?"

"No!" Oikawa swears under his breath, agitated. "I don't know! I don't know what to think! And you – you're Iwa-chan, I always know what to think with you. It shouldn't be like this."

"Like what?" asks Hajime, warily.

"Like I can't afford to believe you!"

Straight for the jugular. It happens so rarely that it's a brutal reminder each time: that Oikawa has an unparalleled ability to land lethal hits on the most vulnerable parts of Hajime. It has Hajime winded, feeling knocked off his feet.

"Shit." He shakily sits down at the edge of the sofa. "You – is that where we are now? You don't trust me anymore?"

"No," denies Oikawa immediately, even though he just said the opposite. Hajime looks at him, disbelieving, and Oikawa scowlingly amends, "I don't know." He looks even more upset. He points a finger at Hajime. "See, this is what I mean!"

"Oikawa, I've got no idea what you're saying."

"I'm *saying* that you're not making sense. This whole thing doesn't make sense. And if you're claiming that you didn't lie—"

"I didn't. I think – I think there were things I didn't tell you, things I should have – but I didn't – I wouldn't lie to you. I was just—"

"That's not any better!" shouts Oikawa. His face is flushed with anger and – and something else. "You – I kissed you! And you didn't give me anything, Iwa-chan!"

"I'm sorry." It feels so inadequate. "Fuck, Tooru – I'm sorry. I was scared."

Hajime thinks about Oikawa saying, *I meant it*, and him replying, *don't do this*. Again, he wants to give the Hajime from two months ago a black eye. Why had he said that? Why had he said, *you don't want this*, instead of, *I want this too much and I'm afraid you're going to regret it*?

Of course, Hajime knows why. He knows exactly why he hadn't given Oikawa anything. Even with all the hours he's spent turning this over in his mind over the last week, this is perhaps the most ashamed Hajime's felt about it. That not only had he shut that door but he never explained what had been going on in his own head. He hadn't given Oikawa an inch. Purposefully so. He hadn't ever thought he'd be in this place: standing in front of Oikawa and *wanting* him to understand the depth of feeling inside of him instead of keeping all evidence tucked away.

And here's the consequence of it: Oikawa ruthlessly going, "So what? D'you think that it was easy for me? That it was nothing? When has being scared ever been a good enough excuse?"

"Never," says Hajime grimly. "Oikawa – I'm not giving excuses. You know I'm not about that. That's not why I'm here. You said you wanted to understand what I was thinking so I'm telling you. I should've – I didn't know how to say why it was so important to me to have you mean it. That it'd kill me if we did this and then you changed your mind, if you woke up one day and realized you made a mistake."

Oikawa doesn't look impressed.

"Anyone could change their mind at any point. That's a stupid reason to—"

"Yeah," says Hajime, heart heavy. "Yeah, I get that. But I – I won't. I know I won't. I can't. Not about you."

Somehow, this is what makes Oikawa's gaze lose some of that unflinching hardness. And even though this is exactly what Hajime

wants, he finds himself looking away from it.

"You're right, it was stupid to have let that stopped me," he says. "I get that now. But while it was happening – while it was happening, it made more sense to me, to think that you wouldn't have wanted something like that with me if you'd been thinking straight. If you weren't feeling all fucked up over what happened with Juan. I thought I'd messed up my chances with you back when we were still in Seijoh–"

A strangled noise leaves Oikawa's throat, but Hajime pushes forward: "And that was – that was eight years ago. The idea that you'd never stopped – thinking of me that way, or you somehow started thinking of me that way *again* – you said it yourself. You would never – you wouldn't ever let someone–"

And here Hajime falters because he can't, he absolutely can't say, *let someone in again, not when they told you no before*, without feeling like he's being gutted while having a knife to Oikawa's throat. "For all that time it didn't even occur to me that you and me – that it could happen. And when it did I just. I didn't understand. I should've known that you wouldn't do that, no matter how fucked up you were, no matter what else was going on." He swallows. "Not unless you meant it."

Not unless they mattered to Oikawa more than the memory – the reality – of being told no.

In all the years they've been what they are to each other Oikawa had never once used the word *love* to describe what he felt for Hajime. Even before his own realization, Hajime wouldn't have thought to put that word to it even though it had been a bone deep truth. *Do you think this would be happening if it was anyone other than you?* Oikawa had asked him, and the answer was so obvious, so factual.

Hajime had known the answer, always. Even when he wasn't sure what it meant. Even now, he doesn't know exactly where Oikawa stands, if Oikawa thinks of them and what it means to be together, to make it work, but he knows that regardless of the specifics and the nuance – the constancy between them has always been this: no one but you.

Oikawa's no longer scowling at Hajime the way he used to at seventeen year old Ushijima, but it's still a far cry from the easy joy that normally exists between them.

"I told you that," he says quietly. "If it didn't make sense to you then – why does it make sense to you now?"

Because there's absolutely no embarrassment that can be worse than the unforgivable outcome of Oikawa not believing him, Hajime admits, "Hanamaki sent me a translation of your magazine interview."

"What?" A wrinkle appears between Oikawa's eyebrows. "There wasn't anything in there that you didn't already know."

"But there was something in there that I stupidly didn't think applied to - to what happened," says Hajime. "You know what you want, Oikawa. It doesn't matter what people think. It doesn't matter what I think. No one knows you better than you do. And it was – it was the stupidest thing I've ever done, thinking for a second I knew what was going on inside your head more than you did."

Somehow, Oikawa looks more stunned now than he did when he'd opened the door and found that yes, Hajime really was standing there. Hajime's heart feels a physical ache, seeing the momentary blur in Oikawa's eyes before he quickly blinks it away.

Oikawa's voice is cracking, but there's still the last vestiges of his earlier rage clinging to it. "You shouldn't have needed reminding of that."

"I know!"

The words blast out of Hajime almost aggrieved. What else is there? It's the summary of what Hajime came to San Juan to say: that he knows he misunderstood, that he hadn't given Oikawa enough credit, and – maybe most importantly – that he wants the chance to fix it if Oikawa lets him.

Angrily, he leaps back to his feet. "I know, all right? I'm sorry. I don't know what else you want me to say. It shouldn't have gone like that

and I know it's on me—"

"So it really wasn't because I read it wrong." Oikawa still sounds like he can't believe what he's hearing – or maybe, what he's saying. "When you pushed me away. It wasn't because you didn't want it."

"No," Hajime doesn't know where to even start explaining how reality is the diametric opposite of what he'd led Oikawa to believe. "I wanted it. I wanted you so fucking badly. That night – Oikawa, if I'd given myself even half a chance I'd have—"

What would Hajime have done? He thinks back to that moment, the way Oikawa had looked at Hajime, had said, *stop me if I'm getting this wrong*, how Oikawa had been close enough for Hajime to see the shadow of each perfect eyelash on his cheek, how his hand had been scalding on Hajime's face.

Even now Hajime feels the phantom press of Oikawa's fingers. And the awful tension between them suddenly stops being stifling and instead becomes unbearable. Apparently this is his limit. It had been enough, in Hajime's mind, to have Oikawa hear this and make up his mind. What he'd owed Oikawa was the truth. Actually having Oikawa agree to the idea of them *together* after two failed attempts had never been a likely possibility. He'd been – he had accepted that could happen. He even told Oikawa as such.

The reality of it now – with Hajime having been left progressively hollower with every word he spoke, having no idea what Oikawa wants at the end of all this, holding on to his conviction that he has to *keep going* with nothing but the skin of his teeth and the constant reminder that this is *Oikawa* and Hajime doesn't ever, ever want to let him down again – it's so much worse than he imagined.

For the first time since Hajime entered Oikawa's home, he finds himself being the one to step away when before all that he could think about was to close the distance between them. It's hard to breathe around Oikawa. He thinks about what he was about to say, gathered at the tip of his tongue, and can't find it in him to throw it at Oikawa the way he had thrown every other truth, every other vulnerability.

Hajime steps away – but Oikawa grabs onto him.

"You'd have what?"

The fire that had been powering Oikawa throughout their argument had been down to its last embers – but it had flared up the same instant Oikawa's arm shot out toward him.

When Hajime doesn't answer, Oikawa demands, "You'd have *what*, Iwa-chan?"

"I wouldn't have stopped at one fucking kiss," says Hajime, voice raw. Oikawa's grip tightens. Hajime barely notices that he's being tugged forward. "I wouldn't have let you go home that night."

I'd have followed you to Kyoto, convinced you that it would make sense for me to get on a plane headed to San Juan instead of Irvine when I left Sendai. I'd have done whatever it took so that we wouldn't have to go in different directions again. I wouldn't have stopped moving, not until you did, and then I'd only have stopped right beside yo–

"Show me."

Hajime blinks, startled at the abrupt command. "Show what?"

"You know what."

Oikawa's gaze is boring into him with that razor sharp focus, that knee-buckling intensity. The look is familiar, as is the crackling electric charge that travels up his spine. And even though Hajime's ninety percent sure he's imagining the look on Oikawa's face – because they're talking about the night that Hajime saw it last, in that moment when the entire world seemed to have held its breath waiting to see what Oikawa would do next–

He still feels like he's been body slammed right out of Oikawa's fourteenth floor balcony.

"I need you to spell it out for me," says Hajime, heart somehow simultaneously in his throat while galloping in his chest. That frustrating, devastating uncertainty starts to give way to something else, equally frightening. "Because if I'm getting this wrong–"

"Do I have to do everything for you? *Show me how it should've gone that night-*" and without conscious thought Hajime grasps the front of Oikawa's shirt, shoves him hard enough so that Oikawa has to take one step, then two, until his back slams against the wall.

Oikawa's eyes go wide behind his glasses. They're close enough that Hajime can see his reflection in his pupils, can see them expanding right in front of him. Close enough for Hajime to feel Oikawa's heart reverberating against his own chest.

But what does it for Hajime is when Oikawa murmurs, "Iwa-chan." *Iwa-chan*. The most aggravating, irritating, well-loved thing Hajime's ever been called, as much a part of him as Oikawa, as much Oikawa's as volleyball, as Hajime, as 13, as being brilliant, infuriating, extraordinary. It's something that won't ever be anyone else's. There's absolutely nothing else to it. There's only one last inch to close. One last step to take.

With all the wild, fervent longing of a lifetime, of the last three years, the last two months, the last excruciating hour coming to a head in this single point in time – Hajime closes that inch, takes that step, and finally – finally – kisses him.

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The thing about Oikawa is that there's hardly ever a middle ground. That night in Sendai had been one of those rare instances when Oikawa had clearly been holding back. Hajime knows this for certain because there's absolutely nothing – *nothing* – careful or civilized about the way Oikawa meets Hajime, hot and wanting, about the way his fingers are tangled in Hajime's hair, tugging, pulling, demanding more.

Hajime wants to say this is how he'd thought it would go but the

truth of it is that he's never even let himself think this far ahead. Not in the last couple days and definitely not in the months and years preceding. He's looked at Oikawa's prefect mouth, has felt the molten desire pool low in his gut, has wanted to taste the sweat on his neck – but then he always looked away. He'd breathed past it, let the want unwind from where his muscles had coiled in an anticipation that wouldn't ever be met until he could be around Oikawa again without feeling like combusting.

Except it turns out Hajime hadn't done that all. Apparently all he'd done was push all of it down, where it grew each time Hajime looked the other way and now it's reached some critical mass that can't be kept suppressed. Every manageable moment parceled away has gathered and mutated into something monstrous and unrestrained. Each of his senses are trained on Oikawa: the taste of him is on Hajime's tongue, the soft, wet gasps is the only thing Hajime can hear. All around him is the scent of soap and Oikawa's stupidly fancy fabric softener, the warmth radiating from his skin.

"Tell me what you want," Hajime finds it in him to say in between one burning kiss and the next. "Oikawa–"

"For you to get on with it, maybe," Oikawa gripes even as his palms slide under Hajime's shirt. Hajime bites down on his lower lip and Oikawa makes a sound that has the frantic heat in Hajime rise up another notch. Hajime mouths along the cut of Oikawa's jaw, which for all its benefits leaves Oikawa's mouth free to go, "I already told you – did you oversell yourself? Is that–"

Another hitched breath as Hajime moves lower, runs his teeth warningly above Oikawa's galloping pulse. The smell of his skin is so strong right there at the junction of his neck and shoulder that Hajime feels lightheaded with it, with how much he– "Is that why we're just standing around?"

"You," whispers Hajime, "are such a piece of shit."

"Awh, does little Iwa-chan need me to wine and dine him before he puts out?"

Hajime pulls away to glare at him – and he does – but it's only for an

instant – because it takes only a single glance at the colour high on Oikawa's cheeks, his parted, spit-slick lips – and Hajime's diving back in again, crushing their mouths back together. He hadn't come here expecting to fuck, but Oikawa's set up the play and expects Hajime to follow through. There's no way that's *not* happening now.

He gets a hand under Oikawa's thigh and hikes up his leg. Then he gets the other, and Oikawa moves without instruction, in sync with Hajime's tells: he grabs Hajime's shoulders and hitches up just as Hajime's hands slide up to his ass, holding him in place and now–

Now, they've gotten even closer.

"So you've got one move." Oikawa's acknowledgment is breathless. "Not b—" and anything else that was following is broken off by a moan when Hajime presses up against his cock and he greedily swallows up the sound. Only one hit and already Hajime has become the worst kind of addict. He'd be horrified if it wasn't inevitable, if this wasn't the only possible outcome if Hajime ever gave himself an inch.

"You want me to show you what I would've done to you, Shittykawa?" The words are spoken against Oikawa's mouth as he rocks into him. "Want me to take you back down that hall and throw you down right in front of the door because that's how far I'd let you go before I tore off every single thing on you?"

"Please." Oikawa's laugh is light, derisive. "As if you could've taken me," as though he's not grinding into Hajime as he says this, bouncing on top of Hajime's dick, the way he would be if Hajime really was fucking him right there against the living room wall.

He's saying it as though he's not spouting his usual Oikawa bullshit between hot, open-mouthed kisses, eyes heavy-lidded behind his fogging glasses, his large, callused hands holding Hajime's head in place.

"As if I'd even have to try," scoffs Hajime, not letting him get away with a word of it. "You'd be so – so fucking hungry to get some cock in you that you'd do all the work for me."

Oikawa's gasps, insulted. His cheeks grow red with fury and

embarrassment and desire, and Hajime wants to see how far down that flush goes, what else it would take to get him worked up all over. "You—"

"You'd be dying to ride my dick before the door even shut." Hajime's never spewed this kind of filth before but with Oikawa it's second nature. A bastardized variation of something they've done a thousand times in the past. "Hell, you're doing it right now – that's how easy it'd be."

"Is talking big all Iwa-chan's good at?" Oikawa shoots back. "Since that's the only thing you've – ah!" His arms and legs tighten frantically as Hajime takes him away from the wall. "What d'you think you're doing?" he squawks. "Put me down, you're going to drop me!"

"Hah, you think you're all I can handle? You're not even halfway to—"

And then Hajime almost *does* drop him because two things happen at once: Oikawa's cock jerks against Hajime, and he drags Hajime into another searing kiss right outside his bedroom door. It's all Hajime can do to blindly stagger forward. When Hajime's knees hit the bed, Oikawa tips backwards and pulls Hajime down so he lands onto Oikawa's chest.

The air barely has the chance to be knocked out of him before Oikawa's demanding, voice thick, "Take this *off*," while yanking impatiently at Hajime's shirt.

Hajime does, and then knocks Oikawa's hands away from where they've successfully managed to unzip Hajime's pants. "No," he says, pushing the sweater off Oikawa's shoulders. He may give exactly zero shits about getting rid of his own clothes no matter how furiously hard his dick's getting in there but getting Oikawa naked – *that's* something Hajime's terrifyingly invested in.

"N– what d'you mean *no*." Oikawa briefly closes his eyes when Hajime pulls off his glasses and tosses them to the small bedside table. "What the hell kind of answer is—" and the rest of that disappears into a muffled *mmph* when Hajime kisses his scowl as he reaches for the hem of Oikawa's shirt and pulling it off over his head.

Oikawa looks part dazed, part irritated, wholly – obscenely – gorgeous and it doesn't matter that Hajime's seen every inch of Oikawa's skin before. That's just how it is when you grow up joined at the hip, sharing the same locker room for six years. It doesn't matter because he's never seen Oikawa like *this*: coloured with want and heaving for breath, his hair sticking up in a messy cloud.

He's never seen this skin rumpling the navy sheets under his shoulders and elbows when Hajime pushes him down on the bed, looking up at Hajime like he wants to be eaten alive. Hajime runs his hands up Oikawa's tense stomach, above his racing heart, presses wet kisses up Oikawa's chest and neck and finally his red-bitten mouth. Oikawa's legs wrap around him, pulls him in.

"I mean," says Hajime, in the brief seconds he should really be using to get some air in him– "I mean – there's no way I'm gonna last long enough to fuck you if you go after my dick right now."

"Sounds like a you problem," and then Hajime's getting reeled back in. It shouldn't be such an ordeal to pull away from him long enough to get his pants off but – it's Oikawa. If it wasn't an ordeal then it wouldn't be him. It wouldn't be winding Hajime up like no tomorrow.

"Where," he tries again, "where's your stuff?"

"Top drawer," and Hajime has to physically tear himself away to crawl toward the bedside table. He grabs the lube and–

There aren't any condoms. Hajime stares, but nothing changes no matter how long he looks. Of course there aren't. Somewhere in the back of his mind Hajime even knows the practical reason on why that'd be: there was no need for them, not when Oikawa's only been with a single person for the last three years and hadn't thought about picking anyone up since. It should still sting a little, probably, but the only thing his fizzling brain can do right now is howl over how completely on brand it is that he'd get this far before getting monumentally cockblocked.

Fuck. Fuck it. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that Hajime isn't one of those guys who keep backups in their wallets. Hajime doesn't

need to fuck Oikawa to get him off, to blow his mind–

–and then he abruptly loses track of where that thought was headed because Oikawa throws himself onto Hajime's back, bites his shoulder and fucking hell that's Oikawa's naked cock that's digging into Hajime, hot and hard.

More playful than threatening, Oikawa says into Hajime's ear, "Did Iwa-chan get lost?"

One of Oikawa's hands is running lightly, carelessly over Hajime's torso, while the other goes for the open front of Hajime's pants and wraps firmly around him. He'd have expected Oikawa to reach in dry so Hajime doesn't know what to do with the fact that he *didn't* – doesn't know what to do with the image of Oikawa dragging his tongue along his palm, spitting into it – except to spread his legs, give Oikawa more access.

He doesn't quite succeed in biting off a groan when Oikawa starts to work him, but he does manage to say, "You're out of condoms."

"Yeah," Oikawa says, uncaring. The hand that's not on Hajime's cock is dragging across Hajime's chest, his stomach, touching every available inch of skin. "Guess you'll have to take me raw."

Hajime has to put his own hand above Oikawa's in an excruciatingly tight grip to stop himself from coming on the spot.

If Oikawa keeps saying this kind of shit, he's not getting fucked tonight at all because he'd have emptied Hajime out long beforehand.

So of course that's exactly what Oikawa continues to do: he purrs, "How does Iwa-chan want me, hmm? On my knees, on my back? You want me on top, riding that monster cock, showing you how it's done?" and it's crazy – absolutely insane how quickly Oikawa can rile him up when he's already at a hundred. This is the bastard who Hajime has, and will continue to, rearrange his entire life to be with for even a single day. But he's also who Hajime's patience and control has always been on the shortest leash with and he can pinpoint *showing you how it's done* as the exact second his fuse goes off because it's Shittykawa at his peak, and Hajime's only got one setting when it

comes to him.

"On your back," he barks, and Oikawa's furnace-like heat promptly vanishes. Hajime rips off the rest of his clothes and when he turns back – his throat dries up in response to the flare of violent hunger when he finds Oikawa reclining back against his pile of pillows just as Hajime had wanted.

"How sweet," coos Oikawa. "You want to look at my face? Make it all romantic?"

Oikawa looks–

Hell, Hajime doesn't have words for how he looks, lying there with his eyes closed, knees up and open with his feet pressed against the sheets, all of him on display. He's perfectly positioned himself for Hajime to see those pale fingers jacking the red, leaking length of him, hips lifting infinitesimally, rhythmically, off the bed. He looks – he looks like some kind of an international incident waiting to happen. He looks like something Hajime would break a guy's face over. He looks depraved, shameless, irresistible.

And there's absolutely nothing sweet or romantic about what Hajime's about to do to him.

His entire hand's dripping with what must be half the bottle of the lubricant, *aloe-infused* because of course that's the kind of thing Oikawa would keep in his bedside drawer. Oikawa, whose eyes snap open when Hajime makes his way back between his legs. Hajime half-kisses, half-bites the soft curve of Oikawa's thigh and slides two searching fingers between his cheeks.

Hajime moves those fingers in a slow circle over Oikawa's opening, feels dizzy as it quivers against him. "You ready?"

Oikawa's hands drop to the bed. That, and the way he lifts his leg and swings it up so that the back of his knee lands heavily on Hajime's shoulder says more than his obstinate, "Are you?"

"I'm five seconds away from throwing you out the window," and the beginning of Oikawa's laugh cuts into a gasp when Hajime presses

into that tight, scorching heat. "Next time," he says, because there's going to be a next time, there's going to be a thousand of them, "next time—"

"So confident, Iwa-chan—"

"Next time," Hajime roughly promises, grip tightening on Oikawa's knee, "if you're less of a brat about it, I'll get you — I'll get you open with my mouth."

Instantly, the sunset pink splotches on Oikawa's chest deepens. He gets so tight around Hajime's single finger that it seems impossible that he'll be able to take anything more.

"And what if I'm a bigger one?" is Oikawa's response, because that's just the kind of person he is. And it's a heady rush — of victory, of satisfaction, of an unbearable fondness — to watch Oikawa bite down on his lip, to watch him squirm when Hajime starts to work into him again and replies, "Then I'll do it anyway. I just won't be nice about it."

The noise out of Oikawa right then can only be described as a whimper. "You don't know how to be nice."

"Yeah? You think I don't know how to keep you in place, hold you open, kiss you real slow, right here—" Hajime pulls out of Oikawa so he can tap at the little gape— "until you're spreading your legs, pushing back against my face, begging me to stop being so *nice*?"

"Oh my God," Oikawa's hands are clenching tight against the sheets, rocking into Hajime's hand. "You're horrible—"

"You don't want nice, Oikawa," says Hajime, and even though he's known this to be true for as long as he's known Oikawa, it's still something to hear Oikawa moan, watch his hand fly to his grip the base of his cock when Hajime goes back in, this time with two.

"If the next thing that happens isn't you slamming into me with your dick," Oikawa swears, "I'm going to get myself off and kick you out."

"Do what you like," says Hajime, "I'm still going to fuck you afterward," and Oikawa's hiss of, "Who knew you'd be more of a

caveman in bed?" melts into an incoherent sound when Hajime, for no other reason than to piss him off, bends down and sucks at the dripping head of Oikawa's cock from where it's peeking out of Oikawa's fist before getting back to work.

"I'm going to kill you," Oikawa pants. "I'm going to *murder you*—"

It isn't until Hajime's three-crossed fingers deep that Oikawa's threats cease and the only thing he can hear is their huffing breaths and the wet, filthy sounds of Oikawa around him. Hajime looks at the beads of sweat trailing down Oikawa's temple, at the way Oikawa's resting his weight on his elbows so that he can stare at Hajime with that bright, almost feral look in his eyes – and Hajime's struck with that awful, desperate tenderness that's always there, underlying every other emotion Oikawa's ever invoked in him, whether it be fury or irritation or blinding, irrepressible joy.

And it does nothing to dissipate the fever pitch inside of him. If anything it gets worse. Because it's Oikawa, and this thing between them that they've never tried to move on from, to maintain in a manageable form, has led to this: all this need and all this want, overgrown, out of control, and every part of Hajime is tangled up in its vines as he kneels between Oikawa's legs, Oikawa's chest heaving, Hajime's own arousal left heavy and aching and at its tipping point because he's seconds away from—

"Tooru," Hajime pulls out of Oikawa and wipes the clinging slick on his cock. He can't even linger to drink in the sight of Oikawa open, exposed, leaking with the obscene amount of lube Hajime's used on him, worked inside of him – he can't, because he's leaning forward, curving over Oikawa, taking his face in between his hands.

There was never any chance of Hajime being able to walk away from any part of this but he's never felt the profundity of that fact in the way he does now – with him pressed up against Oikawa, against his soft, slick entrance, exactly where Hajime's going to fuck into him. If there was no walking away before this– "Are you—"

He doesn't finish, because Oikawa's already going, "yes," dragging him into a furious kiss, "Iwa-chan," and one more time it's a catalyst, somehow more an answer than the vehement affirmation that came

right before it.

Hajime pushes into him and the sound that Oikawa makes can only be described as a wail. Hajime takes that sound into his own mouth, doesn't stop kissing Oikawa, doesn't stop until he's fully sheathed inside of that heat. He holds every inch of him still while Oikawa flutters around him, trying to accommodate, make space and – it's so fucking much. It's so tight that Hajime thinks he may have made up all those minutes he'd just spent easing Oikawa open, getting him ready to take it.

Oikawa's fingers grip Hajime's shoulders hard enough to leave bruises. His heels dig into Hajime's back. When Oikawa's smooth inner muscles pulse against him in the next second, Hajime's moan gets lost between their mouths.

The squeeze, the pressure – it's too much, too fast. "Oikawa." Hajime's hips start to move even though that's impossible, even though there's no room for him to. "Tooru–"

Oikawa slumps his damp forehead against Hajime's shoulder as he takes huge, shuddering breaths. Still, he demands, "Keep moving," and Hajime does, first one slow deliberate thrust, then another, and then–

And then Oikawa's back is curving, head tipping back as he goes, "That's it – that's it, right there, Iwa-chan–" and Hajime's off, holding down Oikawa's hips so he can fuck into him in that exact spot. Harsh gasps are punched out of Oikawa every time Hajime slams into him. Oikawa is everything that's ever been worth looking at, always, but never more so than right now – collapsed on his back, blooming with heat and want.

"Iwa-chan," Oikawa says his name the way he does when there's no one else to call out to, "Tell me, tell me how this is going to go," and Hajime doesn't need his brain working to reply: "I'm going to fuck you until you come all over yourself," and Oikawa lapses into a high-pitched whine when Hajime says, "And then I'm going to keep going, until I'm done with you."

"Fuck," Oikawa's eyes screw shut. "And when – when will you–"

"Never," says Hajime, because Hajime wants more, and he's going mad with it. Each second is better and worse than the second right before and it's the worst kind of greed to be left so ravenous still when Hajime's already got Oikawa underneath him, around him, in the process of coming undone from the inside out, all from Hajime's cock – but Hajime wouldn't have made it here without going after things that were too much to ask for.

"I'm never going to be done with you. Tonight – we're not stopping tonight until we pass out. And in the morning, I'm going to wake up and lick up the mess you'll still have inside you, fuck you open with my tongue because I keep my promises." Hajime's delirious, drunk on the *yes yes Iwa-chan, yes*– spilling from Oikawa's lips, on the images in his head superimposing on the image of Oikawa laid bare in front of him. "Then I'm going to promise you breakfast, but you'll want my cock in you more and with you begging for it – I'd have to have you again, wouldn't I?"

And Hajime has to have more of him even now. He slides his hands from Oikawa's hips to his sides and slips them under his back, splays his hands at his shoulder blades – and then he hauls Oikawa up, pulls him into his lap, keeps himself buried inside that slick, pulsing heat.

Oikawa's arms instantly go around Hajime. "Oh my God." Now Oikawa's flush against Hajime's front, thighs splayed open, his cock drooling on Hajime's stomach. He brings his hands down to Oikawa's ass, and he doesn't even have to lift Oikawa before Oikawa's doing it for him – he shifts to brace his feet on the rumpled sheets, starts to move in those little bounces he'd been riling Hajime up with before, slowly picking up speed. "Iwa-chan–"

"You're not going to get a break until I have to leave." Hajime kisses the salt off Oikawa's neck. "And then I'm going to come back here for good–" he feels the sharp spike of Oikawa's already rapid pulse on his tongue– "bring all my things, and you'll never get a break from me again."

"I don't need a break from you," says Oikawa, and he sounds wretched. "If I haven't gotten sick of you by now then I never will."

"I should be saying that to you, Shittykawa–"

"Shut up, you monster. If you do all that then that – that means *you'll* never get a break from *me*. You'll have to – you'll have to keep up with me–"

"I've always kept up with you," and proves it by starting to fuck into Oikawa again, lifting his hips up each time Oikawa moves down, and Oikawa begins to shake, and the small noises he was making before somehow get worse, more desperate. "You think after all this time you can leave me behind? Fucking try, and I'll show you how wrong you are."

Oikawa's sternum is right at Hajime's mouth, demanding to be marked and so Hajime does, sinks his teeth into one wing of his collarbones. "I'm going to – I'm going to stay here, learn your Spanish – I'll become better than you–" and Oikawa's denial of, "There's no way you'll ever be as good," is undercut by how breathless he is, how he clutches Hajime even tighter.

"Watch me," says Hajime. "You wanted to know how it's going to go? This is what's going to happen: me and you, no matter what. You'll come with me to Sendai for New Years and we'll visit your sister in the summers. You're going to convince my parents to come out here sometimes because they've never been, and you'll have a better shot at getting them on a plane than I ever will."

"What," gasps Oikawa, "What the fuck – why are you talking about them–"

"You know why." It's the only clear thing in Hajime's heat-addled brain, pouring gasoline all over the wildfire spreading through his veins. "You're going to win ten more medals. We'll send your parents to Hawaii for their anniversary, like your dad's been talking about for years. And then–" and the fire is now in Hajime's aching lungs, burning up the air, but he can't stop, not now– "and then when you're ready, when our families need us to, we're going to move back so we can – we can look after them. That's – that's how this is going to go."

"That's crazy," Oikawa's words are frantic, matching Hajime's increased pace. His hands tangle into Hajime's hair and pull, forcing Hajime's head up so he can stare down, burn into Hajime with those wild, blazing eyes. "You're completely – fucking crazy–" and now his

grip on Hajime is harsh, cruel enough to be painful– "and if you ever take it back, I'm going to–"

"What's crazy is to do anything else," Hajime growls. "There's nothing to take back. I told you – weren't you listening to me–"

Oikawa has the nerve to say, "I never listen to you," all the while sinking down on Hajime's cock and riding him so punishingly that he doesn't even know if it feels good or not – all he knows is that he doesn't want it to stop. "Say it again – tell me–" Oikawa looks down at him, mouth parted and eyes wet, beads of sweat gathered at his hairline, trickling slowly, maddeningly down his jaw– "tell me what you came here to say–"

"I want you," says Hajime, and this time – this time the truth isn't liberation. This time it's a shackle, it's throwing away the keys to them, the ones that've been around Hajime's ankles and wrists and longing heart. Hajime never wants an out. Not from Oikawa. "I'm in love with you. There's never – there could never have been anyone else."

And when Oikawa kisses him again – kisses him and holds him and keens into his mouth – Hajime is made whole, even as he becomes undone.

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Hajime enters the next day feeling like he's been run over by an eighteen-wheeler.

He squints at the sunlight falling painfully into his eyes. Waking up

after a night of back-breaking sex probably shouldn't feel so terrible, but having it happen at the tail end of a twenty-four hour long intercontinental haul, followed by the most brutal emotional honesty Hajime's ever had to show, bringing a lifetime's worth of unspoken truths about his feelings for his best friend to the surface, probably has something to do with it. The manic energy that's kept him going since the night he spoke to Mom and Dad has been drained dry and there's nothing more he wants to do than sink back into oblivion.

He tries to hide his face in his pillow. It's no use.

The next option requires herculean effort, but Hajime manages it: he rolls over to his other side so that his back is to the window. And to his front—

"Finally," says Oikawa. "It's past one in the afternoon. When'd you get so lazy, Iwa-chan? I thought you fell into a coma."

Very slowly, Hajime blinks.

Oikawa's hip is inches away from Hajime's face. He's sitting reclined on the bed – legs stretched out and back resting against the wall. He looks alert, well-rested, already showered and dressed. On his lap is a pillow that Kaijuu-chan is dozing on top of. One of Oikawa's hands is idly petting her while the other is holding his phone.

Hajime stares up at him. Oikawa stares back. Then, very slowly – without looking away – Oikawa puts down his phone and places his now-free hand on Hajime's head. Hajime's the one to break his gaze first: his eyes squeeze shut the second Oikawa starts to card his fingers through Hajime's hair, carefully scratching his scalp.

It's – it's sweet. There's no other word for it. Completely new yet somehow familiar, and Hajime feels he's one wrong breath away from doing something hugely embarrassing. He mumbles, "You thought I was in a coma and didn't call for an ambulance?"

"If you didn't wake up by three, I was going to let Kaijuu-chan get her claws in you. One last check before getting professionals involved."

"You're a dick," Hajime mutters, and Oikawa responds, "That's what

you're going with after you fucked me like an animal last night?"

Oikawa says this while continuing to stroke the back of Hajime's ear, soft and affectionate. It's so completely at odds with his response that Hajime could never have seen it coming. He immediately scrambles to sit, face growing hot. He hisses, "*Shittykawa*," and Shittykawa starts to laugh when Kaijuu-chan jerks awake from all the movement and swipes at Hajime angrily with a paw. "Ow – you little–"

She looks way too satisfied as she jumps off the bed and hurries out, and by now Oikawa's howling. Hajime scowls, punches Oikawa's thigh, and shouts, "Yeah, you better run, you smug asshole," after Kaijuu-chan's disappearing form. He grumbles, "She's just like you."

"Sure is," Oikawa agrees, the bastard. Hajime turns to tell him off – but whatever Hajime was going to say is knocked out of him when he finally takes a good look at Oikawa and sees the dark red marks on Oikawa's neck, under his jaw.

In the light of day the memories of last night seem like a vivid fantasy. Some kind of fever induced hallucination. It seems impossible that Hajime had really – that *they* had really done that. Fucked like animals. That Oikawa – *Oikawa* – had been laid open and wanting in front of him, demanding Hajime's cock. That Hajime had sunk into him, had kissed his soft, perfect mouth, that Oikawa had said, *show me*, and Hajime had said–

Well. Hajime had said a lot of things. He remembers it as though watching the scenes of a movie: something taken in by his senses and burnt in his memory, but lived by someone else. Even as Hajime's sitting on Oikawa's bed, his naked legs tangled under Oikawa's sheets, his clothes crumpled on the floor of Oikawa's room – it doesn't make it any more real.

But the evidence is right there. It's present in the deep ache in Hajime's body after the hell he put it through to get him here. How can there be such a shocking disconnect between what he's seeing and what he's feeling?

They should probably talk. No, Hajime corrects himself, there's no *probably* about it. They absolutely should. Even though he has no idea

what to say, and Oikawa–

Oikawa slides off the bed. "C'mon, Iwa-chan," he says, throwing a balled up t-shirt at Hajime's head. His steps are a little unsteady, and Hajime has the belated realization that of course that's how it would be after getting fucked raw the night before. "Get that butt into the kitchen. I think I could hear your stomach crying from abuse while you were conked out."

A necessary pitstop at the bathroom means Hajime takes a few minutes to make it out. His eyes are still itchy with sleep, limbs slow from exhaustion. Oikawa is already fiddling around at the stove: he's humming to himself the way that he does – off-key and louder than he probably thinks – monitoring three different pans. He's got the coffeemaker running already. Hajime chugs down a glass of water, grabs a banana, and when he awkwardly asks, "Should I help with anything?" Oikawa just points a spatula toward the stools on the other side of the kitchen counter and replies, "Absolutely not."

Hajime frowns. Oikawa is reportedly a good host, but he's certainly never tried to be one for Hajime. Not that he was *bad*, but he certainly never hesitated to put Hajime to task. Cut this, pass me that. "Iwa-chan's such a good wife," he'd simper, and then whine and make a big fuss when Hajime would throw a wet dishrag at his face.

But then Oikawa says, "You're so out of it you're going to ruin all my hard work," and the unease in Hajime quiets. He makes some kind of affirmative noise and sits on a barstool at the counter. "I'm basically done. And I don't want to hear any complaining about the quality," Oikawa adds warningly. "It's your fault I had to put the batter in the fridge and you know that causes problems."

It's too early for this. "What are you going on about?"

"If Auntie has anyone to be ashamed of, it's you," Oikawa answers unhelpfully, sliding a plate in front of him. Hajime slowly blinks down and – it's okonomiyaki. That's what Oikawa had going in each of the pans. They smell amazing, each the size of one of his hands. Hajime can't believe he hadn't figured it out the second he stepped in the kitchen.

"You made this?" he asks stupidly, as though it could've been anyone else. "Why?"

"Because I was hungry? What a silly question, Iwa-chan. Oh, the coffee's done."

Hajime stares at the shredded yam peeking out of the fried batter. Oikawa hates yams. In general, but specifically in this. In the Iwaizumi household though – it's not okonomiyaki without it. When they were in high school, when Oikawa would stay over and have breakfast with Hajime and his parents in the morning, Mom would always have a separate bowl of batter with a different base ready for him.

"Not even you can make me think differently about this monstrosity, Auntie," Oikawa would say, giving a suspicious look at the Iwaizumis' plates and curling protectively around his own. "But thank you for accommodating my dietary restrictions, your son isn't nearly as gracious," which is just Oikawa trying to start shit with a straight up *lie* and so Hajime would have to put him in a headlock in retaliation and–

And it's back.

That same feeling from earlier, when Oikawa had run his fingers through Hajime's hair. It has his eyes prickling. Some part of him knows it's because he's exhausted, that his brain isn't firing quite right, but knowing that doesn't matter. It doesn't stop him from feeling like every single one of his nerves is exposed as he thinks, *he did this for me*.

Hajime asks, abrupt, "Do you regret it?" His gaze is still focused on his plate. "Sleeping with me?"

Immediately there's a clatter – the sound of metal falling against the stone counter.

"*What?*" Oikawa sounds so appalled that Hajime has to look up at him and – yeah, his face looks just as confused and upset and offended. "What – no! Why would you even ask that?"

"Because – because I don't get what's happening here."

"You're having lunch!" There's a slightly hysterical note to Oikawa's voice. "What's there to get?"

It's true. All that's happening is that Hajime's sitting there with a heap of okonomiyaki in front of him. Oikawa has done things like this a thousand times before. Some bigger, some smaller. It's a part of what they are to each other. These things have always been there and only started to hit differently after Hajime realized what exactly it was that he felt for Oikawa and wanted from him.

Now, this morning – after last night – again, it's hitting Hajime differently, because something fundamental has changed. He's known this since he opened his eyes and found that he was where he wanted to be, but not where he expected to end up. There's a missing step. Something that was skipped over in all this. And maybe that's why instead of experiencing some kind of disbelieving happiness, all Hajime feels like is an open wound – raw, tender – and it's stifling anything else that's trying to take form.

Oikawa wants to know what's there to get?

Hajime answers, "Oikawa, yesterday we went from you yelling at me to me throwing you against that wall in less than two minutes—" And Hajime knows Oikawa had been *literally asking for it*, and Hajime had made up his mind that he'd never doubt Oikawa's words again, but that doesn't – that doesn't mean that Hajime understands. "And now – now we're standing around like nothing's happened—"

"Twa-chan," Oikawa talks slowly, deliberately, like he's talking to a particularly stupid child, and now a different kind of discomfort itching under Hajime's skin. It makes him feel brittle, too small for his body. Hajime hates it, hates that it's *Oikawa* causing it when Oikawa's only ever made him feel indestructible. "Do you think after what you did to me last night that I'm even capable of *standing around like nothing's happened?*"

"Well you obviously are!" Hajime snaps, and again his face burns at the way Oikawa just says it. Hajime hadn't even felt this – this *shy* after the first time he'd had sex. There's no reason to feel that way

now when it's Oikawa.

"Are you blind? I've been hobbling around all morning! Trust me, I did *not* forget a single thing that happened."

"I'm not just talking about us fucking--"

"I know, I'm not stupid! This is just how I talk!" Oikawa huffs out a frustrated breath and runs an agitated hand through his hair. "Listen, I was worried about you."

Hajime is absolutely not dealing with this again. "Oikawa, if after all that you go off about how I'm having some kind breakdown--"

"I'm talking about you passing out for fourteen hours!" The words burst out of Oikawa. "My God, Iwa-chan – you showed up here in the middle of the night in the middle of the week--"

"10pm isn't the middle of the night--"

"--and I don't even know how long it took you to get here, but I know you don't eat or sleep properly when you're flying, and then you had to go and distract me – *seduce* me with your confession--" Hajime sputters, because that's definitely not what went down last night– "so I didn't even think about all that! I'm just – I'm trying to make sure you don't actually end up in a hospital getting fed through a tube. I'm not--" and here Oikawa has the audacity to make air quotes-- "pretending that nothing happened."

Other than the one part that was one-hundred percent an embellishment, Oikawa is on the money about everything else. Even after so many years of living abroad and flying back and forth multiple times a year to visit his family, to visit Oikawa – Hajime's body's never fully adjusted to it. It's another reason his whole *existence* had felt so insubstantial since he woke up. Hajime is, theoretically, hungry enough right now to eat a whole fucking horse.

But also: "Oikawa," says Hajime. "If I try and eat this right now, I'm going to throw up."

"Excuse me?"

"You need to level with me. I can't – I need you to tell me what you want. And don't," Hajime adds loudly when Oikawa opens his mouth, "don't give me some bullshit answer, like you don't know what I'm asking, and why I'm asking it. I – I know you know."

Oikawa stares at him from the other side of the counter. "Iwa-chan," he says quietly, "I know *you* know what the answer is."

Hajime glances down at the okonomiyaki, then at the giant bowl of batter that's still beside the stove. Maybe he does know. At the very least, Hajime knows what he wants it to be. It's what he's suspected – had hoped for – when he came here.

"Back in the summer," starts Hajime, "you told me you kissed me because you meant it. You don't do anything you don't want to do. You wouldn't sleep with someone – no," he catches himself, "you wouldn't sleep with *me*, you wouldn't start something with me unless you were serious. So yesterday – you meant it yesterday." Oikawa starts to tense, but he nods. "What exactly did you mean?"

Because There's no question as to what Hajime meant. He's made it abundantly, embarrassingly, painfully clear last night and he *wants* to take Oikawa's acceptance of it as an implicit, *me too*, has never needed more than that to know he and Oikawa are on the same page, but with this–

With this, it's different. It was always going to be different.

Oikawa must know this too, because he squeezes his eyes shut and is silent for a minute.

Then, with the same unflinching certainty Oikawa always finds when he's doing anything worth doing, he meets Hajime's gaze.

"I meant that I want you, too. That I love you. I've known what it feels like to love you, in one way or another for twenty years, Iwa-chan. I don't need more time than that to be sure. I want to try to be with you as – as your partner, someone you could be proud of. I meant that I'm all in, Iwa-chan. I want every single thing you said yesterday, and I want it with you."

And the relief that crashes into Hajime is staggering.

He almost keels over with it. It doesn't matter that Hajime had a pile of evidence from the night before stacked in front of him, telling him that Oikawa had felt this way and still did. This final confirmation – it sweeps away the fraying reins that had been keeping him together, and the rigid tension in his muscles slacken.

Hajime has to cover his face to hide the rest of its effects. Has to stop looking at Oikawa.

"Iwa-chan," he hears Oikawa say, unbearably soft. There are sounds of Oikawa shuffling, his bare feet on the floor – and then he's nudging Hajime until Hajime's slowly turning around in the chair until his elbows are no longer on the counter. Instead they're digging into his thighs because Hajime's still hunched over, face still hidden behind his hands. "Iwa-chan, look at me."

"Hell no." Hajime's voice is muffled. He can't look up. If he does, then he's going to absolutely lose it. Oikawa must sit down on the barstool beside him because a moment later, their legs are knocking together.

He places a hand on Hajime's knee. "Are you really so surprised?"

Hajime shakes his head. It's not that it's a surprise, so much as it's– "I'm just – you had such a hard time wrapping your head around it

yesterday that I—"

He doesn't even know how to finish that sentence. If the last twenty-four hours has taught Hajime anything, it's that of all the things he's built a thick skin towards over the years – Oikawa not believing Hajime when Hajime was being as sincere as it's possible for a human being to be isn't one of them. How had he gotten through that without crumbling under the suffocating pressure? Remembering it makes Hajime want to recoil, flinch, as though his entire body is a giant bruise and the most awful weight is being pressed against it.

"Yeah, you're right." Oikawa sounds – hesitant, but it doesn't stop him from saying, "What was happening yesterday – none of it made sense to me until – until it did. And then it made a whole lot of sense. If there's anyone on this planet who would turn someone down because of liking them *too much* – it'd be you."

Not that there's anyone else on this planet Hajime would like enough to go about this the way he did.

But Oikawa's not done: "Iwa-chan, you're so – *you*, so responsible and – and reliable, it actually drives me crazy. I know I was freaking out but you showing up here like that last night, out of nowhere – was it really so weird that I was worried? You have to know that all of this – it isn't like you."

At that, Hajime finally lifts his head and straightens until he's eye-to-eye with Oikawa. Oikawa, who is sitting exactly where Hajime expected to be, watching Hajime with a complicated look on his face – there's concern, fondness, and those traces of confusion that match up exactly with words.

It's completely fucking ridiculous, that Oikawa still has anything to be confused about.

"Dropping everything to fly halfway across the world because I needed to see somebody important to me, before things get worse and I never forgive myself for not doing everything I can?" Hajime puts one of his hands above the one Oikawa still has on knee. "Pretty sure that *does* sound like me."

Hajime sees the exact second when Oikawa gets it because his eyes instantly get wet.

"You—" he starts, blinking rapidly. Something in Oikawa has already cracked and the fissures are spreading and if he gives in to being the huge crybaby that he is, then Hajime's got no chance of keeping it together. "You can't – that's not the same thing at all and it's offensive to Uncle, frankly, that you'd even imply—"

"Yeah, it's not the same," interrupts Hajime. "Except for the parts that are. The parts that I said." Someone important to me. Before things get worse. Before I never forgive myself.

Oikawa whispers, "You're insane," but it sounds like something else. Something that has Hajime feeling unstoppable. He replies, "You're worse," and when Oikawa instinctively kicks Hajime's shin, even as he's dragging the back of his hands over his eyes – in that perfect moment that he'll remember for the rest of his life, Hajime's heart and mind and soul is in absolute peace.

-

They have a day and a half before Hajime has to fly out Saturday night. From what Hajime understands, Oikawa wants to spend the entire time having sex because, "That's what you PROMISED Iwa-chan, do you want to make the first promise you made to me as my *boyfriend* a lie?" And then he goes on to list every single terrible thing Hajime had growled to him last night while they fucked, and – well.

Hajime's a lot of things, but he's not is a liar, nor is he someone who's stupid enough to stop Oikawa from stepping into the shower behind him.

"Also, you should call your parents," Oikawa says afterward. "They've

been trying to get a hold of you all morning. Did you forget to message them from the airport?"

He hadn't, but the last thing he'd texted them was, *landed, heading to Oikawa's now*. When Hajime finally checks his phone, in the LINE he has with his parents he sees a number of encouraging messages, a penultimate, *we'll be taking no news as good news!* from Mom, followed by a, *in the event that no news is bad news, please let us know you're still alive*, a few hours later from Dad.

Then there are a couple of missed calls and finally—

"Oikawa," he says slowly, staring at the little notification that suggests he'd been on a video call with Mom for twenty-two minutes and forty-seven seconds at 11:17am. "Did you talk to my parents this morning?"

Oikawa looks supremely unbothered as he picks up a whining Kaijuu-chan from the floor and goes to put out food for her. "Sure did."

"Uh, okay." Of course he did. Hajime doesn't even follow that up with a "why?" because he already knows the answer, which is a "why wouldn't I?" while looking Hajime dead in the eye. "What did they say?"

"That they're happy you didn't die on the way here," answers Oikawa. "And how they can't believe that an ogre like you managed to land someone so far out of your league."

Hajime rolls his eyes. He doesn't know exactly what he thought Oikawa would say, but that answer was definitely what he should've expected. "One of these days they're going to figure out that you're a swamp creature, and not... whatever it is you've convinced them you are for the last twenty years."

"Sounds like *someone's* jealous that I'm the favourite," singsongs Oikawa, and then hits his head on a cupboard when Hajime replies, "I guess the Iwaizumis all share the same crap taste."

"Iwa-chan!" he cries out when Hajime starts to laugh. "Why is it that you can't even be nice without being mean?"

"I don't know, why is it that you can't be anything without being shitty?" Hajime counters, simultaneously a question and an answer. Oikawa throws him a glare that's more playful than angry and Hajime can't stop grinning. Can't believe how their usual dumbass banter's somehow shifted into this – into flirting. Because that's what's happening right now. Hajime's flirting with Oikawa.

There's truly nothing in this world that can surprise him anymore.

Hajime does end up calling his parents that night – their morning – for a catch-up that lasts less than two minutes. It's all very efficient. Hajime says, "Sorry for going MIA," and Mom replies, "Don't worry, Tooru-kun told us you were fine! It's so good to see your face though, sweetheart. Enjoy your time together, don't let us keep you!" Dad adds, "Good job," and then the call disconnects.

The hours pass in a strange, carefree daze. Hajime takes another nap; he then wakes to find Oikawa sleeping beside him, hazy in the late afternoon sun. It's the height of indulgence just to watch him. It's outright decadence to be able to kiss him awake, to breathe him in, to hear him murmur, sleep-soft and annoyed, "Iwa-chan, leave me *alone*."

They don't leave the apartment once, except for the 5 minutes it takes Oikawa to go to the lobby to meet the guy delivering dinner. The day passes in the way that their weeks in Sendai did in the past summer, but even moreso: this time they really are in a bubble of just the two of them. Oikawa periodically returns some messages, but mostly the phone stays out of the way. They eat on the couch. He puts his feet up on Hajime's lap, listens to Hajime economically recount the sequence of events leading to him showing up to Oikawa's door with more blatant interest and fascination than he's ever shown Hajime his entire life.

"Why are you so obsessed with this?" asks Hajime. "I *know* Mom and Dad already told you about some of it." It's horrifying, but also a reality Hajime had resigned himself to the second he saw Oikawa had a twenty-two minute conversation with them.

"Because it's not everyday you get to experience a shoujo manga through the love interest's eyes." He says it like it's obvious, when in

no world is that a normal response. Then, with a lot more sweetness accompanying his usual shitstarting commentary, Oikawa says, "Iwa-chan really likes me so much, doesn't he?"

There's no way to deny it without it being embarrassingly obvious he's lying. Hajime can only say, "Nobody's perfect, Shittykawa," and it's not even annoying when Oikawa laughs at him. There's just something about Oikawa when he's like this. He looks – he looks the way Hajime likes him best, genuinely happy and bright with it. Illuminated from the inside. Impossible to look away from.

When Oikawa catches Hajime staring, he quirks an eyebrow. "What?"

"I want to kiss you," admits Hajime, because that's something he can own up to now. Oikawa's eyes widen in surprise, but then immediately go soft and pleased.

"Well, who can blame you," he says. "C'mere."

Oikawa is just – he's always been something Hajime could never have too much of, but now, with him right there, solid and warm and eagerly willing in Hajime's arms – now it's something else entirely. The wild exhilaration, the excitement, the delirious happiness that had been missing this morning under the smothering weight of that last, lingering uncertainty is now a constant presence. The shock is still there but Hajime's wanted this so deeply and for so long – without any real expectation of it coming to be – that it'll probably take a while to stop feeling like he's been punched in the face every time he looks at Oikawa and realizes he now knows how Oikawa looks like sitting on his cock, how he looks when he says, *I love you, and I'm all in.*

In between Oikawa pressing the kisses Hajime asked for on Hajime's mouth – and forehead, and cheeks, and every other part of Hajime's face available for kissing – Oikawa quietly says, "You really are too much, Iwa-chan." One more kiss, this time back to Hajime's lips. "It's how you tricked me into becoming my favourite."

"Shut up," mutters Hajime, feeling his throat close up. He's going to die an early death if he has too much exposure to this sort of thing.

Thankfully, Oikawa seems committed to irritating Hajime for a long, long time: he gets a considering glint in his eyes right before he says, "Hmm, something's definitely not right if you think *telling me to* is the most effective way of shutting me up," and Hajime's always been so stupid toward Oikawa's dumb taunts that it's the easiest thing to give him over to it.

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"I can't believe I have an 8am practice," Oikawa complains that night. He's lying on his side on the bed, clutching a pillow to his chest. Hajime's sitting beside him with Oikawa's borrowed laptop on his lap. As soon as Hajime's done checking into his flight, he decides, he's going to replace that pillow with his own body.

"Maybe I'll come down with a sudden cold," Oikawa is saying, mostly to himself. "Did you know Coach had the nerve to say I was starting to look 'run down' at the end of the road trip? He'll probably be *happy* if I say I need to sit out tomorrow. But on the other hand: do I want Blanco-san to think he was right? Is the long-term consequence of him holding this over me worth it? Hmm."

"Why're you pretending there's even the slightest possibility of you skipping out on practice?" Hajime genuinely wants to know. Oikawa never misses practice. Even when he gets benched because of an injury, he still shows up to hawkishly observe the rest of them. That's how he was like at Seijoh, and – if the anecdotes Hajime has heard from Oikawa's current teammates can be trusted – he's still the exact same now.

"Because I've spent thousands of mornings in practice," Oikawa stubbornly replies. "And tomorrow's the only morning I'm getting with Iwa-chan because he *slept through this one*."

Hajime finally shuts the laptop and places it aside. He then gently flicks Oikawa's forehead. "Can you give that a rest? I'll just go with you tomorrow."

"No way, that's a dumb way to spend your vacation."

"Oikawa, every other time I was here during your season you *made* me go to your practice—"

"I have no memory of this," lies Oikawa, all the while maintaining bold eye-contact with Hajime.

Hajime has to ignore this for the sake of his own sanity. "And I never give a shit," he continues loudly, "because the only reason I come here is to hang out with you. But if you're going to make a huge deal about me having fun... it's been a while since I got to insult you from the stands," smirks Hajime. "That would *definitely* be a good use of my vacation time."

Oikawa narrows his eyes up at him. "It's also been a while since I jump-served a ball straight at Iwa-chan's stupid face," and he looks so annoyed that Hajime just has to kiss him.

For someone who makes it a point to make things as difficult as possible just for the hell of it, Oikawa easily yields to this transparent ploy at distraction. Easily and immediately, as though he was waiting for it. Maybe he was. Hajime doesn't think anyone else has ever been kissed so much in a single day as Hajime has been in just the last twelve hours.

Yet not a single inch of Hajime has had enough yet. He's barely satisfied. Not with kissing, not with anything more, not with the indescribable happiness that comes from just being in Oikawa's space, from having him *right there* every time Hajime looks up. From being able to talk to him and touch him whenever he wants. He has no idea how he went so long without it.

Later, when the lamps have been turned off and Hajime has successfully replaced the pillow Oikawa had been hugging to his chest – exactly as planned – the last thought Hajime has as he's tugged into unconsciousness is that it probably isn't the 8am practice

that Oikawa cared about.

Because Hajime had spent most of the day before sleeping, he wakes up before dawn. It's the kind of wakefulness where Hajime instantly knows there's no closing his eyes and conking out again. He checks the time and finds there's more than an hour before the alarm's set to go off. Thankfully, getting out of bed turns out to be an easy task because Oikawa's rolled away from him during the night.

By the time Oikawa stumbles into the kitchen – looking disgruntled and disoriented and heading straight for the coffee – Hajime has, in reverse-chronological order: finished making breakfast, emptied the trash, replied to all the messages he'd set aside yesterday, and started thinking about December. He even made sure to put out food for Kaijuu-chan – who has been up for as long as Hajime has and spent the entire time skulking around giving Hajime dirty looks – instead of letting her fend for herself.

"You're lucky that I don't do things expecting gratefulness or appreciation," he had told her. "Otherwise you and your horrible father would never get anything out of me."

Kaijuu-chan, of course, hadn't acknowledged she heard anything.

The kitchen this morning is a mirror image of the afternoon before: Oikawa's sitting on the barstool looking like he's considering just lying down on the ground and giving up on being a person. Hajime's standing on the other side of the breakfast counter, wondering how someone can be so useless.

"Urgh." Oikawa slumps over. His cheek is squished against the surface of the counter. "Iwa-chan. Iwa-chan, I'm sick. You should feed me and then send me back to bed."

"You big baby," says Hajime, but undercuts the insult by squeezing his shoulder and gently tugging at his hair to prod him up. "Sit properly and eat."

"Your bedside manner is terrible," complains Oikawa, but he does sit up. "Is this what I have to look forward to in my future? Iwa-chan heartlessly leaving me to fend for myself while I suffer from unknown ailments?"

"Got it in one."

Breakfast for Oikawa includes a fried egg and avocado sandwich, half a banana (Hajime gets the other half), and sausages cut into bite-sized pieces. It's the same thing Oikawa has eaten on practice days every time Hajime's been here. Oikawa spears one of the sausage pieces on his fork and points it at Hajime.

"I think you're lying," he declares. Hajime rolls his eyes. "I think if I was sick – which I *am* – then you'd be the world's most doting nurse. You'd press towels to my forehead, make sure I'm hydrated, take my temperature, scratch my head..."

There's something about the way that Oikawa says all this that has Hajime suspicious. "Is this some deranged fantasy of yours?" because if Hajime has learned anything over the past eighteen hours, it's that Oikawa really is the kind of maniac who'd definitely make themselves sick for a sex thing.

Oikawa proves this by brightly replying, "Guess you'll find out the next time I see you."

But almost before the words even finish forming, Oikawa's expression changes from that easy cheer to something unsettled. Hajime's face is doing the same thing. And knows exactly why: *next time*. The idea of there having to be a next time when they see each other – that this isn't just how it *is* – sits uncomfortably between them.

Oikawa turns his eyes to his plate and aggressively bites into his sandwich. He's frowning as he chews.

"Hey," Hajime says, not wanting to think about the hard parts about

this just yet. "I was thinking about next time, actually. That's what we were supposed to talk about the other night."

It takes a second for Oikawa's confusion to clear. "You mean that wasn't just a cover to make sure I'd be home when you got here?"

"Not *just* a cover," says Hajime. "And I figured... I figured what we ended up doing in the winter depended on how you reacted to what I had to say."

"You mean how I reacted to your *confession*," corrects Oikawa, and getting that delighted, self-satisfied smile back on Oikawa's face is worth the instinctive embarrassment that's prompted in Hajime at the teasing tone.

"Whatever," he huffs. Hajime doesn't actually have anything to be embarrassed about, he reminds himself. Well, other than the obvious: that anyone who likes Oikawa as much as Hajime does must have something wrong with their head. "I came out the winner, anyway."

Hajime only realizes what he's said after it's already left his mouth. Oikawa blinks, once, twice, three times. Then he says, "Iwa-chan."

"*What*," says Hajime.

"There's no way I lost to you there," and – well, now Hajime really does have something to be embarrassed about, and it's an offshoot of the other one: how hot his face grows when Oikawa says that. This whole thing is just so stupid. After everything they said to each other yesterday and the day before, Hajime doesn't know why they're both talking around it now.

"And because Oikawa-san is so generous and gracious to the people who he has a decisive victory against—" Hajime can't stop the bark of laughter that escapes him. Oikawa's just so full of shit. "I'm going to give you a consolation prize."

That familiar, predatory look is back in Oikawa's eyes. Dry-throated, Hajime says, "Is this something you give to all the losers?"

"No, no, this is especially for Iwa-chan," says Oikawa emphatically. "No one's ever lost to me this badly before. You should come here

and get it."

Hajime still maintains that he's the winner here, but it's easy to forget about all that when Oikawa's kissing him.

-

At practice, Mateo takes one look at Oikawa before he woops and turns to Hajime, holding up an arm for a high-five. Hajime naturally returns it, something Oikawa takes great offense with.

"Congrats, man," says Mateo sincerely in English. "I'm glad everything worked out," before turning to Oikawa and going off in rapidfire Spanish. Hajime doesn't need to know the language to know exactly what's happening: afterall, shiteating grins are globally understood, and the vein popping out on Oikawa's forehead is one Hajime is intimately familiar with.

"What did you *tell* him," Oikawa hisses after Mateo bounces off. "When did you even get the chance?"

"I just asked him for your practice schedule while I was figuring out my flight," says Hajime, which is definitely not the whole story, but as much as Oikawa's going to get out of him.

"Yeah, well, you picked the biggest gossip on the team as your wingman."

Oikawa might sound miffed, but the expression on his face gives away how unabashedly thrilled he is that Hajime roped in his favourite kouhai.

"I'm shocked he didn't give anything away," he continues, doing that thing that he's been doing since middle school, fluffing his hair as

though there's paparazzi camped out right around the corner waiting to snap a photo of him. He's such a goddamn loser. "I hope you're ready for the national news to cover this tonight, Iwa-chan. You're going to get so many jealous death threats and envious congratulations for – ow!"

He looks comically betrayed that Hajime punched his arm when it was the only reasonable course of action. "Iwa-chan!"

"No one cares about this, Shittykawa," but he's immediately proven wrong when he sends Oikawa off to the changing rooms by pressing a kiss to that wounded pout and multiple catcalls erupt behind them.

It's a good morning. Oikawa on the court is always a sight, and with Blanco-san's permission, Hajime makes good on his promise and heckles him for an allotted 10 minute window. CA San Juan is a powerhouse team, technically, but equally important to Hajime is: the way they draw in around Oikawa and listen to him. The way they make fun of him, the way they praise him. The way they completely lose their heads when he lands a disgustingly precise serve or pulls off an unbelievably perfect set.

What's important to Hajime is how their laughter is rambunctious but fond when Oikawa loses his patience with Hajime's mean-spirited commentary and starts hurling volleyballs at him while screaming, "How are you still here?! Coach, kick him out! Call security! This – this is harassment!"

What's important is how Oikawa glows around them, how he stands with the confidence that only comes when you know for certain you are wanted, that you belong.

After, when they're heading back to the car, Hajime tells him, "You looked good out there."

"Of course I did," replies Oikawa, as though it's obvious. And it *is*, as far as Hajime is concerned, but Oikawa lights up to hear it. "Did you see when–"

"–you made that set from a one-touch outside the bounds, and then Gabriel absolutely nailed it?" finishes Hajime. "Nah, I was on

Twitter."

"Urgh, you're the worst." But Oikawa's reaching for Hajime's hand, squeezing his fingers. He's smiling when Hajime glances up at him. Hajime squeezes back, and only barely manages to stop himself from taking things further in a very public parking lot.

-

The hours of yesterday afternoon felt like Hajime had been removed from time. Like there was nothing else outside of Oikawa and the four walls of his apartment, no responsibilities except learning Oikawa in this new way Hajime hasn't known him before now.

There had been something languid curling around Hajime's muscles. Partly from being wiped out from the last few days, partly from wanting to be completely certain he'd gotten his hands and mouth on every inch of Oikawa's skin. Like everything that's ever been worth doing, Hajime had taken to the task with focus and dedication. Even in Hajime's memory everything seems to be through a golden haze, with slow moving limbs and long, indulgent kisses.

This afternoon is – not like that.

Hajime is hyper aware of every second passing. On the drive to the restaurant where they sit down for lunch, and then on the walk they take afterward around the neighbourhood. The brief moment of strangeness from the morning that they'd successfully distracted themselves from during Oikawa's practice is back with a vengeance.

Oikawa oscillates between being affectionate and teasing – calling Hajime the most insulting names in a sugar sweet voice, poking his cheek, kissing his hand – to being moody and silent, that familiar deep wrinkle between his eyebrows. Not that Hajime's any better: it's

Hajime's default setting to be at ease around Oikawa, to laugh at his nonsense and lean into his warm, sturdy weight. But then Oikawa will look a certain way and Hajime will want to take his stupidly pretty face in between his hands and kiss him and all at once Hajime remembers that in just ten hours – then nine, eight, down to seven, now – this'll come to an end.

He'll remember sitting with him on the Oikawas' front steps back in the summer, hit with how much harder it was going to be to leave home this time around and realize he can't even wrap his mind around how much worse it's going to be, to be so far from Oikawa now. Oikawa, who was always going to be part of his future but now *is* his future. It seems completely counterintuitive to be anywhere else. It doesn't make any sense. Even though it would be temporary, even though Hajime is not going to rest until he's right back beside him, this time for good – the wrongness of it doesn't let him go. Not so soon after they finally made it here.

The drive to the airport after dinner is quiet. Normally they say their goodbyes at Oikawa's apartment – either because Hajime's taking a cab if his flight's at a weird time, or because the dropoff at departures is so hectic that it usually lasts all of thirty seconds before other drivers get antsy and Oikawa's hustled off by security – but this time Oikawa actually pulls into the paid parking.

For a few seconds after Oikawa turns off the ignition, neither of them move.

Then Oikawa lets out a long, deep exhale. "Okay," he says. He looks up from where he'd been staring at his lap, unbuckles his seatbelt. "All right, lets get–"

"Tooru," interrupts Hajime quietly, reaching for Oikawa's arm.

Oikawa immediately moves away. "Iwa-chan, if you do that I'm seriously going to start crying and it'll be hideous and awful for everybody."

"I mean, you're always hideous," says Hajime and Oikawa whips his head around to scowl at him.

"You really are a complete monster," he accuses. "I can't believe how much I'm going to miss you, even though you clearly don't appreciate how amazing I am—"

"*What?!* I literally drop everything and fly across the world for you, and you have the balls to tell me I don't *appreciate*—"

"You just called me ugly!"

"Oikawa, I could call you a disgusting nest of maggots—" and Hajime has to ignore Oikawa's shriek of, "What is *wrong* with you!" to continue, "and it's not going to change the fact that you're seriously the most beau—"

Oikawa slaps a hand over Hajime's mouth. His eyes are wide. His face is much, much redder than what it had been a second ago when he was yelling at Hajime.

"Oh my God," he whispers, like he's afraid of being overheard, "you can't just say something like that!"

"You're so damn frustrating," groans Hajime, muffled. And when Oikawa squawks, "Me! I found a gray hair this morning because of you!" Hajime can't fathom how his body, with all it's human, physical limitations, can hold such a boundless well of affection toward a single person. There's no explanation, except that it's Oikawa, and there really isn't anything that's not possible when it involves him.

He pulls Oikawa's hand away from his mouth but keeps a hold of it between both his own. "Hey," he says, trying to speak past the tenderness that's got its claws in his throat. "Everything I said this weekend – you know I meant it, right? Everything. Even – *especially* the parts that sounded crazy?"

Oikawa looks away from Hajime again. "Yeah," he says. "I know you

did. That's not what I'm—" He stops, and when he resumes he sounds troubled. "We only got two days, Iwa-chan. Two days! And normally I'd be over the moon to get you for that long, but this time—"

"This time it really sucks," finishes Hajime, and the stiff nod of Oikawa's head has Hajime tightening his grip on Oikawa's fingers. "Tooru, I'll be running back here the second I can. First thing Monday, I'm telling Utsui-san that we need to start recruiting for the clinic."

"What?"

"It'll take some time to find a good fit," explains Hajime. "And I don't want to leave the clinic in a bind by not giving enough time to plan for my backfill, but if it comes down to it – if it takes more than a couple months, then I'm still leaving."

Oikawa stares at him.

Very slowly, he goes, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but you're absolutely not telling your boss you're leaving your job next week." Hajime can't believe what Oikawa's saying either, but probably due to different reasons. "And I can tell you're being serious! So don't – don't do that."

"Like hell I'm not." Hajime shifts a little so he's facing Oikawa. "From the second I decided that I was coming here, all I've been doing is thinking about how this was going to go if you – if you wanted to be with me."

Hajime has spreadsheets outlining the timeline and logistics. How things would work with their families, with Hajime's career, with Oikawa's ambitions. It had probably been bad form to spill all this to Oikawa while they'd been fucking – though Hajime can't regret it, not when it ignited the reaction in Oikawa that it did – but the thoughts hadn't come out of nowhere.

"I'm not doing anything half-assed," he says, determined to make sure Oikawa doesn't find anything to doubt. "I've got it figured out, I have a plan—"

"I know you have a plan, but Iwa-chan—"

"Then you know the only thing I'm *not* going to do is hold up being with you because of something like where my job is." That's the only part of all this that's non-negotiable: continuing to live a life separate from Oikawa when it's taken Hajime this long to catch up to him.

"Tooru, I can work anywhere—"

"Well I can play anywhere too!"

Hajime's mouth snaps shut, the echoes of Oikawa's shrill, frustrated shout bouncing around in Hajime's ears. Oikawa rips his hand away so he has both arms free to fold them across his chest and glare at Hajime.

"You're not the only one who's been thinking about this," he says, letting out an annoyed huff. "I knew you were serious about all that stuff you said. I'd been turning it over in my head all of yesterday morning while you were sleeping. And after talking to your parents – well, of course you were right about needing to be there for them when they're older." Oikawa shakes his head. "Iwa-chan really did take everyone and everything into account in his grand plan. Everyone except for himself."

Not understanding exactly what's happening when everything Hajime has thought about *hinges* on what Hajime does, he goes, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about how you're *not* going to quit your job and move to another country where you *don't know how to speak the language* when—" Oikawa swallows, "when that's not the only way for us to – to be together, in the same place."

Hajime stares at him blankly until the alarm on his phone goes off to let him know he has two hours left before his departure time. He impatiently snoozes it.

"Oikawa, you're not leaving San Juan," he says. "Your team's here, your life. How can you say that with a straight face? You *know* you wouldn't be happy just playing anywhere."

Because he wouldn't. Oikawa is too good at putting down roots. His track record speaks for itself: most athletes switch around teams, switch between leagues – to learn something new, to take on new challenges – but Oikawa's been with San Juan since he was nineteen. Had worked his way to be the starting setter for the country, and had done all of it all the while refusing to go anywhere else.

Sure, he theoretically is at risk to be traded just like everyone else. But it's not something he'd choose. He wouldn't leave them. He's loyal, even in this. Hajime doesn't ever want him to lose it. There's a core unit of them – Oikawa, Javier a couple years ahead of him, Mateo a couple years behind – who stay in place even as the team around them naturally changes. They've been brothers to Oikawa, there for him in a way Hajime hadn't been able to since they left Aoba Johsai.

And for Oikawa to say that it doesn't matter– "It's the stupidest thing I've heard all week," Hajime says, knowing full well it's going to set Oikawa off but unable to stop himself.

Sure enough, Oikawa immediately demands, "How's that stupider than what you were going to do?"

"Because it's not the same," says Hajime roughly. Why's Oikawa saying these things? Hajime is used to him making things harder than it has to be, but this–

"It's exactly the same! You said that you wouldn't let something like where you work stop you from being together!" Oikawa bites his lip, and the way he looks at Hajime– "Why – why can't that be true for me too?"

It might as well be a suckerpunch to his gut, might as well be a building collapsing right on top of his chest. Hajime suddenly can't breathe, and it gets worse when Oikawa quietly adds, probably to himself, "I'm supposed to bring the best out of my team. And I've been on Iwa-chan's even before he made me realize that I don't ever have to be without one."

"Tooru–"

"No."

"What d'you mean *no*."

"I mean you can't quit," says Oikawa. "Not yet. Not unless you can convince me that's the best way forward. Best for the team." Then, because Oikawa knows Hajime as well as Hajime knows him– "And if you do it anyway without my vote, then I'm going to make you regret it. I'm going to – I'm going to do something crazy." He nods to himself, as though he's already decided what crazy thing he's going to do. "So don't quit yet," he repeats. "You know how long I remember things."

There's so much there to unpack that Hajime doesn't even know where to start. He tries and fails to speak several times and not once is he successful.

"But – but I have a plan," is what he finally manages to say. "I don't understand why you're – you don't have to give anything up. You'll get everything you want. It – it'll work for everyone–"

"Well, it won't work for me," Oikawa says with finality. "And if you don't like that then – then you've got only yourself to blame for headbutting this into me when I was in middle school!" He points a threatening finger at Hajime. "You reap what you sow, Iwa-chan. So I don't want to hear any more complaining about this when really, it's all your fault to begin with."

Hajime–

Hajime can only stare at him.

This fucking guy. Of course this is happening in Oikawa's car in the middle of an airport parking lot. Of course Hajime had said what he had to say, and instead of taking the path Hajime had painstakingly carved out to have as little obstacles for Oikawa to walk on – Oikawa had to go and do something completely fucking insane and make it harder for everyone, especially himself.

Of course he had the nerve to try and somehow turn it all around and pin it on Hajime.

And Hajime's still the fool here for expecting anything different. For not taking into account just how far Oikawa's willing to go when he knows what he wants. That Oikawa isn't afraid to walk a harder path – to leave behind what is comforting and familiar and loved – to do what he has to. The way he already has once.

"You're such a stubborn bastard," whispers Hajime. He isn't at all surprised to find his voice unsteady.

"And you're a horrible bully," Oikawa shoots back. "Let's not forget I definitely drew the short stick here."

"This is incredible," Hajime murmurs under his breath. That's what Oikawa is – incredible, in every possible definition of the word. At least half of them terrible, all of them loved. And because Hajime's never conceded to Oikawa on anything without believing it and doesn't plan to start now:

"I'm not going to back down from this, Shittykawa," he says. "You want me to convince you? What I said – it is what would be the best for the team. And if you can't see that – then I'm going to show you. You're going to admit that I'm right."

"I am, am I?" And the tense, serious lines of Oikawa's face give way to something else. Something dangerously confident, familiar. It's the look that says, *I'm going to enjoy destroying you, and get ready to lose*. Oikawa's mouth tilts up, and it's not a soft smile or a happy one – but it's Oikawa in the most essential way. It's Oikawa, and Hajime loves him, and Hajime's never going to let him go.

"It's always nice to dream the impossible, Iwa-chan," and there's no hiding the challenge, no matter how sweetly he delivers the words. With all the determination that can only come from an Oikawa Tooru who has his eyes set on victory, he meets Hajime's gaze and says, "Bring it on."

And Hajime - as has always been the case when Oikawa's involved - does exactly that.

Author's Note:

the amount of happiness i want for these clowns...
absolutely insane.

i wanted this out by april 1, and then by iwa's birthday, and when it was FINALLY DONE i legitimately could not wait all the way til july 20 (the next ~special date) to post. if you made it til the end: thank you for reading, and i really hope you enjoyed visiting iwaoi with me!

here is the [tweet for this fic](#) if you'd like to share <3